

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

Call for Applications: AI4D Innovation Scaling Challenge

“Advancing Responsive and Inclusive AI Innovations for
Sustainable Development in Africa”

Application Open:
July 4, 2025

Submission Deadline:
September 4, 2025
23:59:00 HRS EAT

Contact details:
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Reference Number:
ACAII-002-2025

Introduction

The Lab for Ethics, Policy and Scaling of AI (LEPSAI), of the African Center for Technology Studies (ACTS) invites eligible AI innovators to express their interest in participating in the AI4D Innovation scaling challenge. This project is intended to support deployed and in-use AI innovations that promise significant social impact and demonstrate readiness to scale. The innovation or solution must demonstrate readiness to scale beyond the current user base. Solutions must be beyond the proof-of-concept phase and be deployed under real-life conditions. Earlier-stage ideation-only concepts will not be considered at this time.

Background

Responsible AI can tackle Africa's development challenges, but scaling real-world solutions responsibly is critical. Artificial Intelligence for Development (AI4D) is a programme, supported by Canada's International Development Research Centre and the UK government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, that aims to foster safe, inclusive and responsible AI ecosystems that empower people and accelerate progress on critical development challenges. AI4D supports responsible AI ecosystems where experts across Sub-Saharan Africa are enabled to develop their own solutions to these challenges and mitigate AI risks through safe, inclusive, rights-based and sustainable AI applications and policies.

Launched initially as 'AI4D Africa' in 2020, the first phase of the programme laid a solid foundation by supporting responsible AI policies, multidisciplinary research, and innovative use cases across the African continent. Building on this success, AI4D entered its second phase in 2024. At its core, AI4D seeks to contribute to two critical outcomes:

- **Scaling innovation:** Supporting and expanding impactful AI applications that address key development challenges, such as gender inequality and environmental sustainability.
- **Shaping policy:** Establishing responsible AI policies and regulations that minimize harm and promote inclusivity, ethics, sustainability, and human rights.

The Innovation scaling challenge of AI4D is an initiative that supports the appropriate scaling of responsible AI innovations that can have a demonstrated impact in priority sectors and domains. These include education, climate change mitigation and adaptation, agriculture and food security, and solutions that reduce inequality, including those focused on gender inequality, disabilities, and vulnerable communities. This project engages the LEPSAI lab to guide scaling efforts, provide technical assistance and collaboration with innovators, and develop use cases, advancing an inclusive AI ecosystem across the continent.

Eligible Countries

Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Cote d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini (Formerly Known as Swaziland), Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, The Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

Objectives of the AI4D Innovation Scaling Challenge

The AI4D Innovation scaling challenge seeks to support the appropriate scaling of responsible AI innovations that can have a demonstrated impact in education, climate change mitigation and adaptation, agriculture and food security, and inequality, including gender inequality, disabilities and vulnerable communities, in alignment with the AI4D vision. To do this, selected challenge participants will be provided with:

- Collaboration, technical assistance and demand-driven training tailored to their individual needs.
- A third-party assessment of their AI solution, focusing on responsible AI with an emphasis on gender and inclusion, to identify and prevent human exposure to different kinds of risk that can be generated by the use of AI.
- Participation in a networks of innovators, responsible AI collaborators, and user communities across the region, giving exposure to innovators and experts from diverse backgrounds for greater cooperation and visibility.
- Stronger understanding of responsible AI from diverse perspectives, including gender equality and inclusion (GEDI).
- Potential follow-on funding opportunities for innovations that are scaling responsibly.
- Deeper understanding of ethical considerations in preparation for any future auditing process or regulation change.
- Preparation for changes in regulatory environments where greater transparency is required.

Benefits of this Challenge to the Innovators

If you apply and are selected for the AI4D Innovation Scaling Challenge, you will receive:

- Funding to scale your in-use AI innovation
- Scaling of Responsible AI Solutions (SRAIS) collaboration/technical assistance from a global network of experts. SRAIS supports innovators in ensuring that all stages of the AI solution development; problem formulation, data collection, model development, model deployment, and model scaling are implemented ethically and with consideration of human rights and other key principles of responsible AI. In the immediate past, a similar program has supported several AI innovators globally, including innovators from the African Track as detailed in the following link:
<https://wp.oecd.ai/app/uploads/2024/12/17-Scaling-Responsible-AI-Solutions-Building-an-international-community-of-practice-and-knowledge-sharing.pdf>
- Networking opportunities with like-minded innovators, researchers, industry leaders, policy makers, and funders

Expectations from the Innovators

The challenge expects the innovators to participate in the following;

- Implement the project according to the agreed work plan, budget and milestones.
- Participate in the SRAIS collaboration program. The collaborative sessions employ regular and interactive learning between the collaborators to discuss ways of scaling responsible AI solutions, tailored to individual solutions and needs.
- Implement the lessons learnt by interacting with collaborators across the development cycle of innovation and demonstrate progress in the scaling of responsible AI solutions through periodic reports, presentations, and prototype showcases.
- Contribute to knowledge sharing by discussing insights and lessons learned.
- Provide regular updates on project milestones and challenges.
- Be open to feedback and willing to iterate on solutions.
- Commit to deploy the innovation for the public good and create social impact
- Collaborate with researchers in documenting project outcomes, impacts and lessons

What We Want to Learn and Achieve

Through this challenge, the project aims to:

- Identify and support responsible AI innovations that can demonstrate that they are tested, in use and addressing development challenges, in their scaling journey.
- Understand barriers and success factors in scaling AI solutions in low-resource environments
- Strengthen the AI innovation ecosystem in Africa
- Promote responsible and inclusive AI practices.
- Generate insights and best practices for AI developers, policymakers and other key ecosystem actors.

Focus Sectors

In alignment with the AI4D vision, the challenge will prioritize solutions that serve, support or are aligned with any one or a combination of the following themes:

1. **Gender Equality, Disability and Inclusion** – Gender equality, disability, and inclusion are intertwined concepts that aim to ensure everyone has equal rights, opportunities, and access to services, regardless of their gender, disability, or other identity status. These are considered crosscutting themes and can be a distinct focus of a solution but should be embedded within other domains where relevant.
2. **Education and Skills Development** - Leveraging AI to enhance teaching and learning experiences and outcomes.
3. **Agriculture and Food Security** - Enhancing agricultural productivity and sustainability and improving food systems through AI-driven solutions.
4. **Climate Action and Environmental Sustainability** - AI tools for environmental monitoring, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and sustainable natural resource management. These can include AI for deforestation tracking and biodiversity conservation, climate forecasting and adaptation modelling, AI in water and air quality monitoring, among others.

Eligibility criteria

Eligible applicants include the following:

1. Individual researchers and innovators.
2. AI startups and MSMEs/SMEs.
3. Research institutions and Universities that are engaged in AI Research and Development.
4. Consortia comprising multiple stakeholders working collaboratively on AI solutions.

Important dates

RFP Announcement:

July 4, 2025

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Sensitization webinars

1st Webinar - 25th July, 2025
2nd Webinar - 29th August, 2025

Available Funding

The applicable seed funding support is **100,000 USD** depending on the stage of solution development and subsequent plans of the innovator. Ongoing funding after the initial challenge completion is possible for those which show significant promise in scaling.

Applicants must demonstrate:

1. That they have built an AI solution proven to work through successful deployment in an operational setting, among the intended user community.
2. That they are based in Sub-Saharan Africa
3. That their proposed AI solution is responsible, innovative and addresses a specific problem among the focus areas.
4. That no currently existing solution is adequate to address the problem and that an AI solution will make a meaningful impact.
5. What type of community the solution serves and in what ways was that community engaged in the development of the solution? In what ways will the community continue to be engaged through the scaling process?
6. At what stage is the solution in the pathway to scale? Reminder that the AI solution should be beyond the piloting and testing phase and proof of concept has been established in order to be eligible. Please also describe the envisioned next steps for advancing your solution.
7. The potential for scalability and sustainability of the proposed solution beyond the current funding cycle.
8. Project duration – projects that can be implemented for not more than 12 months

Submission Guidelines

Applicants should fill the template provided on submittable [HERE](#). The template shall constitute of;

- **Applicant profile:** Background information, including relevant experience and ability to develop an AI solution.
- **Project Concept Note:** A concise description of the AI Innovation Scaling, targeted challenges, objectives, implementation plans, and expected outcomes.
- An **initial self-administered** responsible AI and scaling **assessment**.

Evaluation Process

The RFP will be evaluated by a panel of judges, with combined expertise in: AI technologies development, relevant domain areas, responsible AI, gender equality, disability and inclusion, and scaling.

Submissions will be evaluated based on:

- **Innovativeness:** Solution should be novel and exciting.
- **Usefulness and Impact:** The solution should be addressing a big problem that either affects a significant section of the community or affects any section of the community deeply.
- **Users:** Convincing identification of the target user community and commitment to work closely with that community in scaling the solution.
- **Viability:** Demonstrable functioning of a tested copy of the innovation. Evidence of the solution having interacted with a user community is essential.
- **Scalability:** Demonstrable potential of the solution to scale and a willingness to pursue scaling aggressively.
- **Responsibility:** Evidence of the earlier phases of development of the Innovation done responsibly, and evidence of commitment to scale responsibly.
- **SRAIS collaboration:** Demonstration of commitment to the SRAIS collaboration program.

Disclaimer

Submitting a response to this RFP does not automatically guarantee that the applicant will be selected to participate in the subsequent stages of the selection process.

N/B:

- Ensure that all submissions adhere to the guidelines provided. Late or incomplete submissions will not be considered.
- By participating in this RFP, applicants acknowledge and agree to the terms and conditions outlined herein.

Contact Information

For inquiries or further information, please contact:

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