

Questions and answers on the AI4D research labs call

March 15, 2021

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1. Questions about eligibility

Questions received	AI4D team’s answers
Can the call be opened up to private Universities?	The call’s objective is to strengthen capacity in publicly funded institutions in Low and Lower Middle income countries in Africa, aiming to ensure that there is public capacity for advancing AI research. Grants agreements will only be signed with a primary partner from an eligible public university, and will not consider private universities at this time. However, private universities are able to partner as a co-applicant on an application led by an eligible public institution.
Can you clarify how to describe collaborations in the Expression of Interest?	<p>All proposed collaborations are at the discretion of the lead applicant. The proposal MUST provide the following rationales in the proposal:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • describe the roles and responsibilities of each partner and added value provided by each partner; • explaining the rationale for the different organizations/universities/industry partners have come together to implement the labs to advance the research agenda; • specify the value of the budget being directed to collaborating institutions, as well as the location of the institutions in question. <p>Pan-African collaborations can be proposed. At least 51% of the budget should be directed to the lead applicant in order to be successful. To be considered an African institution, it must be headquartered in the continent.</p> <p>International collaborations will also be considered, however note that no funds from the grant can be allocated for salaries, travel, or research expenses related to those international collaborations.</p>

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Can we be allowed to collaborate with industry to establish the lab?	Collaborations with industry, private universities, or any other stakeholder of Africa's science community including from the industry is welcome as long as it meets the above criteria.
Is there any prohibition on Expressions of Interest indicating how International collaborations will be leveraged to enhance the capacity of the lab, i.e. can EOIs detail the participation of researchers not based at the applicant institution/on the African continent?	This call is addressed to Africa's public universities as an opportunity to strengthen their capacity. Collaborations within and between institutions and organisations headquartered and based in Africa are welcome. Should applicants choose to propose international collaborations (outside Africa), note that no funds from the grant can be allocated for salaries, travel, or research expenses related to those international collaborations.
Are Canadian academic institutions eligible to be a consortium partner or join the research team as a third party/partner organization?	See above. The intent of the call is to promote locally grounded research, and therefore all funds related to this grant are planned for Africa-based universities and institutions.
Is South Africa an eligible country for this call? The call says lower and lower-middle-income African countries are eligible, yet the list here: https://ai4d.ai/calls/multidisciplinary-ai4d-labs/ does not list South Africa.	<p>South Africa is not considered an eligible country, and therefore, can only be included as a co-applicant with an eligible applicant. We follow the World Bank classification for Lower and Lower-Middle income countries. South Africa is not eligible as it is classified as an Upper Middle-Income Country.</p> <p>Institutions based in South Africa can receive funds as a co-applicant and collaborator given they are in Africa. As per the call requirements, IDRC will only support a contractual agreement with the lead applicant, which must be a public university from an eligible Lower and Lower-Middle income country.</p>
Can two (2) public institutions in the same region (Country and state) apply jointly?	Yes. While grants agreements will only be signed with the lead applicant, a second institution can be included as a collaborative partner, which should be reflected in the proposal. The latter institution will be considered as a sub-grantee for the purposes of the application. Please note that it is expected the lead applicant to be a public university.
Can a public university Lab allowed to partner with a private computer science school in the same country? Can a public university Lab partner with individual researcher/Lab from other public universities?	Yes, collaborations with private universities, or any other stakeholder of Africa's science community, is at the discretion of the lead applicant.

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Can a public university Lab partner with private Data Science (Machine-Learning and AI) company in the same country? in the west-africa french speaking region?	Yes, this is allowed. This includes collaborations with individuals or private institutions from Africa. As per the call criteria, the lead applicant must be a public university or an institution affiliated with a public university.
Does the lead applicant - the public university - need to have an existing computer science school?	<p>It is not a requirement that the institution have an existing computer science school IF they can demonstrate the institution and/or research team has the capacity to support advanced and multi-disciplinary artificial intelligence research from a related discipline (e.g. bioinformatics, etc.). Given the duration and amount of the grant, the selection will prioritize applicants who are able to mobilize existing infrastructure and capacity.</p> <p>It is essential to the laboratory application that the lead applicant, or at least some of its key staff have a strong background in machine learning, computer science or artificial intelligence more broadly to advance research. If the grounding comes from another faculty and will be acquired through collaborations, it must be clearly explained how that would work given it's a key component of the labs' foundation.</p>
Can an institute located within a university be the lead applicant? Or does it have to be the university itself?	Both are fine. If a Public University-affiliated institution, you need to clarify the relationship with the university and the institution's sustainability plan to advance research beyond the duration of the grant.
Does the host institute have to be specialized in computer sciences?	No, the institution (and primary investigator) could be from another discipline, but the application must demonstrate the ability for the research team to conduct advanced research in machine learning and artificial intelligence.
Can a labs be located across multiple sites? E.g. several geographical sites while it belongs to the same university?	Yes, it's possible. That said, this wasn't the initial thinking about the labs' design. Please make sure to provide an explanation in your EOI about how this set-up is the most suitable and efficient approach to your situation.
Does the future labs have to be attached to an existing laboratory?	<p>There is scope in this call to support an existing lab or to support the creation of a new one. However, the budget an applicant can use for infrastructure is limited to 20% of the overall budget. More guidance on budgets can be found on IDRC's website at:</p> <p>https://www.idrc.ca/sites/default/files/sp/Documents%20EN/resources/idrc-guidelines-for-acceptable-project-expenditures.pdf</p>

2. Questions about the application process

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Is it possible to have a Webinar / online knowledge session to share insights on the standard or recommended operating structure for a University centric AI Lab?	<p>Two one-hour information sessions were organised:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tuesday, March 9 at 8 AM EST / 16 PM UCT (English) • Wednesday, March 10 at 9 AM EST / 14 PM (French) <p>The recordings and powerpoint presentations are available on the ai4d.ai website.</p>
Is it possible to have the application period / deadline extended?	The current, expression of interest stage is opened for a 5-week period. Shortlisted applicants will get an additional month to prepare full-fledged proposals. The deadline will not be extended.
Can one institution submit more than one proposal?	Yes, it is allowed.
Can one institution apply to this call, as well as another call opened concurrently, for example the climate change innovation network call?	Yes, there are no limits as to how many applications one institution can submit.
Do partnering institutions need to submit individual applications?	No, only one application must be submitted in the case of a consortium. It must be submitted by the lead university.
Do we put a precise budget at the EOI stage or do we just give rough amounts for the key activities?	We need to see an overall budget with a certain level of details for key activities, but we don't require anything granular at this stage. A breakdown of costs for major budget lines is sufficient.

3. Questions about the scope of work

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In the call, it is mentioned about scholarships for graduate and Ph.D. students. Are these scholarships included in the CAD \$1 million	The call asks that capacity strengthening opportunities are provided to Masters and PhD students. This can be done different ways, including through paid positions, scholarships, honoraria, research stipends, mentorship opportunities, etc. These opportunities for peer-learning and capacity strengthening must be included in the CAD \$1 M overall budget, and should be integrated in the overall outcomes of the laboratory.

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budget?. And, will the students under the scholarship be recruited in the same university where the lab is based and be part of the lab?	
The call insists on collaboration. What is the scope of collaboration?, are we allowed to form a collaboration with western universities, or it is just among African universities.	<p>Multi-disciplinary collaboration can allow for more effective use of available resources and funds, and provide greater scope for projects and results. But there could be other strategies that are more effective in your context. For the purposes of this call, collaborations are defined two ways.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-applicants: these are optional agreements with other institutions which may be proposed to meet the objectives with this call. The expression of interest needs to provide a rationale explaining why the different organizations/universities have come together to implement the labs and describe the role and added value provided by each institution (see above). • Multi-disciplinary: the applicant should within the Expression of Interest demonstrate efforts to engage researchers and academics with different approaches beyond computer science and artificial intelligence (such as law, sociology, health, agriculture, climate change, gender studies, etc), either from within their own institutions or with more formal kinds of collaborations.
How many projects will the lab be allowed to conduct?	It is up to applicants to develop and propose a feasible and achievable research agenda, including an initial set of research activities that are relevant in the local/regional context and can make lasting contributions to the research field. There are no upper or lower limits on the number of projects, but proposals will be evaluated in part based on the feasibility of the proposed research agenda.
In the current call context, what does "Artificial Intelligence" refer to (Machine-learning/AI/all data science technics)?	AI4D Africa uses the OECD definition of an AI system as a “machine-based system that can, for a given set of human-defined objectives, make predictions, recommendations, or decisions influencing real or virtual environments. AI systems are designed to operate with varying levels of autonomy.”
What do you mean when saying multidisciplinary? Does it mean let's say, healthcare,	We mean research that produces multi-, inter- or transdisciplinary research, across disparate fields, bringing in scholars from disciplines, ranging from computer to natural to social sciences, to collaborate on the development and implementation of a research agenda. Having one discipline represented, like healthcare for example, would not be sufficient.

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<p>finance, agriculture, etc...?, or even healthcare alone can be considered multidisciplinary as inside it involves physicians, nutritionists, psychologists, trainers, and gynecologists.</p>	
<p>Who is suitable to lead the AI4D labs? Does it have to be a senior lecturer or a senior professor?</p>	<p>We do not have in mind a specific profile neither a specific title or level of expertise. It's a question that is left to the applicant to propose as it constitutes a key part of the proposal itself. We however expect to have someone with significant experience in the field who will demonstrate a clear commitment to AI4D values and principles.</p>
<p>Can the funds be used for the physical building of labs?</p>	<p>It is possible to purchase equipment, computers, etc. that are required for running the labs for up to 20% of the overall budget. Building a physical lab can be an expensive undertaking and applicants should be mindful that budgets will be evaluated against value-for-money. More guidance on budgets can be found on IDRC's website at: https://www.idrc.ca/sites/default/files/sp/Documents%20EN/resources/idrc-guidelines-for-acceptable-project-expenditures.pdf</p>
<p>Can PhD students be engaged in the labs, and how?</p>	<p>Applicants are invited to include in the labs design mechanisms to support undergraduate and graduate students from different departments to learn and acquire new skills. The grant isn't meant to support individual capacities but rather support activities that can reach a great number of students. We believe students participation is essential for making labs work and sustainable over time.</p>
<p>Is collaboration with existing labs in the same country allowed or encouraged?</p>	<p>Yes, there is scope in this call to support the creation of a new labs or the expansion of existing labs. The objective of this call is to strengthen capacities especially where there aren't many labs already, but collaborations with existing labs are definitely encouraged.</p>
<p>Can one university develop more than one lab that would work together but have different focus, in a way to support multidisciplinary research?</p>	<p>The initial thinking is to have only one lab, which will be the center of excellence for multidisciplinary research on AI. This said, there are no specific rules against the suggested configuration as long as it can fulfill the overall objectives of the call.</p>

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What is the maximum for indirect costs?	IDRC requests that a maximum of 13% of the budget is allocated for indirect costs. More guidance on how to plan budgets can be found on IDRC's website at: https://www.idrc.ca/sites/default/files/sp/Documents%20EN/resources/idrc-guidelines-for-acceptable-project-expenditures.pdf
How narrow of a thematic focus are you looking for? Would a labs focused on addressing a specific development outcome work like climate resilience?	The vision is to have labs that have a holistic view on responsible AI and can contribute to broader discussions and debates on the future of responsible AI in the continent. Of course, choices on priority themes will need to be made once the labs are set up, but nonetheless it should encompass a few disciplines and areas of work.
Is natural language processing and computational linguistics, as part of AI, to solve certain problems, would be part of something that can be supported?	Yes, there are clear implications of where NLP can help. It's a key underlying infrastructure.
What are you expecting in terms of research agenda for this initiative at this stage?	The core objective of this call is to foster academic talent and build capacities and advance research around the responsible use of AI to solve key development challenges. We anticipate the research agenda to touch on technical and societal issues.
What is the exact duration of the project?	The project duration is about 32 months, given IDRC's agreement with Sida. The precise duration will depend on when the grant agreements for the labs are signed. The budget needs to be fully spent within this timeframe.
Can you tell us more about your expectations in terms of co-funding or resources mobilisations?	We don't have a specific formula in mind. This said, IDRC requests a local or in-kind contribution for all grants. We believe the demonstration of a university's commitment can indicate better chances of sustainability over time, which will be positively assessed in the EOI.
Can you share more details about the involvement of the Portuguese-speaking researchers?	It is not mandatory to collaborate with Portuguese-speaking countries, but we encourage collaboration and inclusion of researchers from underrepresented countries.