

EmpowerHerAI - Call for proposals for responsible and inclusive artificial intelligence in Africa

Supporting the scaling of gender-responsive solutions in agriculture, education and African languages

Call for proposals: IPAR-GRAIN-02/2025

Deadline: 30th July 2025

Context

Artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming economies, societies and ways of producing knowledge at an unprecedented rate. In Africa, it is attracting growing interest in research, public policy, technology companies and civic initiatives. Today, AI is seen as a development lever capable of responding to structural challenges in key areas such as agriculture, education, health and governance. However, its potential can only be realised in an inclusive and equitable way if the principles of ethics, accountability and, above all, gender equality are integrated into the design of innovations.

This is the background to the AI4D Africa programme, launched by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in partnership with a number of African and global players. This initiative aims to catalyse AI innovation ecosystems in support of sustainable development on the African continent, by promoting technological autonomy, knowledge creation and the production of solutions adapted to local contexts. One of the fundamental pillars of AI4D Africa is the promotion of responsible AI, i.e. AI that respects human rights, fosters social inclusion and actively contributes to reducing inequalities.

Yet gender issues remain largely marginalised in debates, research practices and technological projects. This marginalisation manifests itself in a persistent lack of data disaggregated by sex or gender, which limits the capacity of AI systems to produce differentiated analyses and take into account the specificities of women, girls and other marginalised groups. It also results in the reproduction of sexist and racial biases, often induced by the use of historical or unrepresentative datasets, which can lead to algorithmic discrimination in access to services, opportunities or resources. The homogeneity of design teams, dominated by male profiles from technocentric backgrounds, further reduces the diversity of perspectives taken into account in the creation of technological tools. Added to this is a lack of local capacity for responsible AI research, particularly in French-speaking African countries and rural areas, and a lack of dialogue between disciplines - social sciences, gender studies, computer science, data science and public policy - which is essential for understanding the social, cultural and ethical implications of these technologies. These findings converge towards a clear conclusion: there is an urgent need to build an inclusive, equitable and gender-sensitive AI in Africa, not only to correct existing biases, but also to make AI a lever for sustainable social transformation.

GRAIN: a structured response to the intersection of gender and AI

It is against this backdrop that the GRAIN - Gender and Responsible Artificial Intelligence Network - project was born in 2022, funded by IDRC as part of the AI4D Africa programme. GRAIN is a pan-African initiative structured around three pillars:

1. Creating an inclusive network bringing together researchers, practitioners, innovators, civil society organisations, policy makers and entrepreneurs committed to gender and AI issues.
2. Build the capacity of African actors to develop and implement responsible and gender-sensitive AI practices.
3. Produce knowledge and tools to analyse, design and evaluate AI-based innovations according to gender, inclusion and diversity criteria.

Led by a consortium comprising the Initiative Prospective Agricole et Rurale (IPAR - Senegal), the Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa (CSEA - Nigeria) and Sunbird AI (Uganda), GRAIN has supported nine innovative projects in six African countries.

These results confirmed GRAIN's strategic potential to transform African technological innovation ecosystems. However, they also highlighted certain limitations that need to be overcome in the second phase of the project:

- Low representation of French-speaking teams in funded projects, due in particular to language barriers, a lack of visibility or limited access to funding opportunities.
- Need for a standardised methodology to integrate gender and inclusion considerations into the evaluation of innovations.
- The need to step up support for existing innovations (and not just new projects), by equipping teams with tools for scaling up, contextual adaptation and documenting social impacts.
- Growing demand for sustainable collaborative spaces, beyond one-off calls for projects.

A new dynamic for GRAIN II

GRAIN's second phase, through the *EmpowerHerAI* proposal, aims to respond to these challenges and amplify the network's impact. It is based on a logic of active inclusion, deepening of methodologies and networking of high-potential innovations. It is structured around several priorities:

- The **creation of a GEDI (Gender - Equality - Diversity - Inclusion) framework** to evaluate AI-based innovations.
- **Selecting and supporting existing solutions** through targeted calls for proposals.
- The **production of applied knowledge** on the uses of AI in three strategic sectors: agriculture, education and the translation of African languages.
- **Setting up a mentoring, training and action-research system** to support innovators.
- The **organisation of a living community of practice**, with events, collaborative platforms and accessible publications.

Purpose of funding

This call for proposals is part of the momentum generated by the second phase of the GRAIN (Gender and Responsible Artificial Intelligence Network) project. It aims to identify

and support four innovative artificial intelligence-based solutions, developed on the African continent, that effectively integrate gender and inclusion issues into at least one of the following three sectors:

- **Agriculture:** In the agricultural sector, AI offers major opportunities for improving the resilience and performance of African food systems. For example, it can be used to develop climate forecasting, disease monitoring, agronomic recommendation and value chain management tools that can be accessed via mobile phones. These innovations can increase productivity, limit losses and connect producers - particularly women - to markets and financing. However, these same tools can exclude the most vulnerable women players if the data used does not reflect their reality, if the interfaces are not accessible (language, digital, cost), or if the solutions assume a standardised and masculinised operating model. AI can therefore consolidate asymmetries if it is blind to gender, local practices or forms of family and subsistence farming.
- **Education and STEM:** AI can transform education by making learning more individualised, interactive and accessible. AI-based tools are already being used to adapt educational content, automate assessments and recommend learning paths. AI can also promote the inclusion of children with disabilities or in remote areas. However, if it is poorly designed, it runs the risk of widening the gaps: perpetuating sexist stereotypes in the content generated, excluding girls from certain technical modules or accentuating the digital divide. What's more, the lack of female representation in STEM courses and in the very design of AI-based educational solutions limits their transformative impact. It is therefore essential to back up these innovations with a fundamental reflection on equity and gender-differentiated learning dynamics.
- **Translation and enhancement of African languages:** In this field, AI can be used to create automatic translators, voice synthesisers, conversational assistants or databases in local languages, thereby contributing to greater linguistic, cultural and cognitive inclusion in the digital space. These tools can facilitate access to information, learning, justice or health for non-French or English-speaking populations. However, these systems are often fed by biased textual corpora, lack dialect diversity or ignore the specific social uses of languages. The risk is twofold: to reinforce the invisibility of minority languages, and to reproduce gendered or hierarchical representations in translations. Responsible linguistic AI therefore presupposes a participatory, feminist and cultural approach to data collection, validation of usage and interpretation of contexts.

A total of four projects will be selected, each receiving funding of up to 4,500,000 FCFA (nearly 6,800 Euros) for a period of 12 months, together with technical and methodological support structured by the GRAIN network.

The call specifically targets innovative solutions that have already been developed and require support to incorporate GEDI principles in their scaling-up phase.

Proposals from institutions in French-speaking Africa are particularly encouraged, with a view to rebalancing the region and making the most of the continent's linguistic and contextual diversity.

Please note: Funding does not cover basic technological development, but rather gender mainstreaming, documentation of approaches, impact assessment and the structuring of

inclusive deployment methodologies.

Integration and development of a GEDI framework

One of the cross-cutting ambitions of this funding is to strengthen the capacity of African innovators to systematically integrate the principles of inclusion, gender equality and responsibility into their AI-based innovations. To achieve this, the selected teams will be invited to adopt and mobilise existing international frameworks, in particular :

- the [OECD principles](#) on trustworthy AI ;
- [UNESCO's recommendations](#) for ethical AI;
- the Toolkit for Gender-Responsive and Inclusive AI developed by GIZ as part of the *FAIR Forward* initiative;
- critical and participatory tools such as those produced by the [Data Feminism](#) project.

These frameworks provide useful references for structuring the design, data analysis, impact assessment and governance of AI technologies from an inclusive and equitable point of view. The GRAIN network will support their contextualisation to African realities through workshops, webinars, mentoring and exchanges of practice between innovators. Funded teams will be required to document how they use these tools at each stage of their innovation's lifecycle: design, data collection, model training, deployment, evaluation and continuous improvement. They will also be invited to participate in the co-construction of a contextualised GEDI framework, based on their experiences in the field. This framework will include analysis criteria, indicators, diagnostic tools and practical guides. It will form the basis for the creation of a pan-African toolbox for inclusive AI, shared with the other hubs and partners of the AI4D network.

How the GRAIN network will support projects

The selected projects will benefit from several forms of support:

- Customised technical support: needs assessment, mentoring, expertise on GEDI methodologies;
- Access to an active community of practice: exchanges between peers, participation in webinars and monthly meetings of the GRAIN network;
- Support for structuring and documenting their GEDI approach: contribution to a common repository and promotion of good practice;
- Support for scaling up: development of replicable deployment strategies adapted to African realities.

Eligibility criteria

To be eligible for this call, an applicant organisation must meet **all the** following conditions:

- Be a legally constituted organisation whose head office is based in sub-Saharan Africa (including private companies, start-ups, universities, research centres, NGOs or innovation laboratories).
- Be able to work in English and/or French.
- Have already developed an artificial intelligence-based solution, currently being

tested or deployed, in one of the following three areas: agriculture, education or STEM, translation or processing of African languages.

Please note:

Beneficiaries of funding under phase 1 of the GRAIN network are eligible, provided they present a new phase of development or scaling of their solution.

Solutions at the idea stage or without a functional technological base are not eligible.

Commitments expected from beneficiaries

The selected organisations must undertake to:

- Participate in the GRAIN network meeting, scheduled to take place in Cape Town (South Africa) from 2 to 4 October 2025.
- Demonstrably integrate the principles of responsible AI and gender and inclusion considerations into all stages of project implementation (deployment, improvement, dissemination).
- Actively participate in monthly network meetings (online), as well as in experience sharing, co-learning and co-construction of GEDI repositories.
- Contribute to the implementation and running of the network (webinars, cross-activities, mentoring, documentation of results).

Timetable

Stages	Dates
Launch of the call for expressions of interest (phase 1)	10th July 2025 at 17:00 UTC
Deadline for submission of the concept note	30th July 2025 at 23:59 UTC
Selection of shortlisted projects (up to 10) and return to applicants	6th August 2025
Invitation to submit a full proposal (phase 2)	6th August 2025
Deadline for submission of full proposals	22nd August 2025
Final selection and notification of the 4 selected projects	2nd September 2025
Finalisation of grant agreements and mobilisation	3-26 September 2025
Start-up of funded projects	1st October 2025

How to apply

Applications must be sent via the google form linked here:

<https://forms.gle/PJaTE5vJHxYXRgbg8>

The form includes :

- a presentation of the AI-based solution, how it is rooted in gender issues, the targeted objectives and the envisaged GEDI approach;
- a short profile of the organisation;
- CVs (2 pages per CV) of the team members
- full details of the contact person.

Deadline for submission: 30th July 2025 at 23:59 UTC

Any application submitted after this date or sent through another channel will not be considered.



Shortlisted projects will receive an **invitation to submit a full proposal**, together with a detailed outline (narrative, budget, timetable, administrative documents, etc.).

Practical information

All the information on the call for proposals (documents, criteria) will be available on the GRAIN website: www.grain-africa.org

If you have any questions, please write us at grain.africas@gmail.com Applications submitted by email will not be considered.