

AI FOR HUMANITARIANS: SHAPING FUTURE INNOVATION

BACKGROUND

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is likely to dramatically change our world in coming years. In countries and institutions around the world the evolution of AI is being debated and shaped. Among a small group of humanitarian practitioners there is a rich debate in the opportunities and risks that AI holds. However, currently the future of AI in humanitarian aid is being overwhelmingly shaped by the voices of the Global North.¹ The humanitarian principles of ‘do no harm’, neutrality and impartiality, set the standard and highlight the risk this imbalance of power in setting the agenda on AI creates. How will our emerging future in the humanitarian sector maintain these principles whilst also being inclusive, safe, ethical and equal for all if we do not give space for more voices to be part of the debate?

The humanitarian sector must be responsive to what is emerging from these global fora where discussions are being had and decisions made. The communities that the humanitarian ecosystem supports are some of the most vulnerable and at risk of exploitation. We have a responsibility to ensure measures are in place to protect those communities from the potential harms of AI while also capitalising on the technology’s potential to respond more effectively to ever more acute and protracted humanitarian crises.

Elrha is a global organisation that finds solutions to complex humanitarian problems through research and innovation. We are an established actor in the humanitarian community, working in partnership with humanitarian organisations, researchers, and innovators to tackle some of the most difficult challenges facing people all over the world.

Our [Humanitarian Innovation Fund](#) (HIF) aims to improve outcomes for people affected by humanitarian crises by identifying, nurturing and sharing more effective and scalable solutions. We work with the humanitarian community to identify and prioritise key humanitarian problems, and to design innovation challenges that address them. Our portfolio of more than 200 projects has driven the understanding of what successful innovation looks like, and what it can achieve for the humanitarian community.

In collaboration with UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub an initial exploration of the discourse surrounding AI in humanitarian aid has raised a range of key issues which we further explored with the HIF Advisory group and through interviews with experts in the field. These included:

- Existing research and information into the potential of AI for the humanitarian sector is often led by the technology sector and academia with focus being either too high-level, focused on a single use case or technology, or overly technical.
- Technologies are often considered as the focus or solution to a humanitarian challenge, but technologies by themselves are rarely “the solution,” but there is pressure to keep pace with advancements to attract funding.

¹ Shi, Z. R., Wang, C., & Fang, F. (2020). Artificial intelligence for social good: A survey.

- This reinforces a high barrier to entry and engagement inhibiting the potential for effective and informed adoption and innovation. With upfront development costs and the need for specialist expertise remaining high.
- At the same time there is an imminent global focus on setting standards for the use of AI. With national regulations coming into effect and global advisory groups taking place in 2024.

In our role of supporting innovations to navigate a complex and overburdened humanitarian system, we recognise that the speed at which the field of AI evolves makes it difficult for many humanitarian actors to engage. With this speed of development and the magnitude of both risks and opportunities the technology brings, there is an urgent need to bring together diverse practitioners with a deep understanding of the challenges facing vulnerable communities to collectively define the problems that future AI systems can and should respond to.

Our aim is to support humanitarian practitioners from diverse contexts to look to the future potential of AI, to engage with the development of AI systems, and be responsive to emerging plans to govern them.

THE FUNDING CALL

This Challenge will support a cohort of up to 10 grantees, to take **a problem-led approach and collaboratively explore the opportunities and risks associated with AI, to identify future areas of impact for further investigation and potential investment.**

The cohort will be part of a 6-month guided learning journey, where they will take part in group discussions and hands-on exercises trialling AI tools, hear from guest speakers and experts from the field to provide real-world insights in best and next practice, as well receive one-on-one support from mentors.

At the end of this journey each grantee will have developed a concept note which will contain a clear problem statement, an analysis of the associated opportunities and risks, reflections on the feasibility of existing solutions both AI and other, and which, with the support of mentors, outlines potential future AI solutions of relevance to their chosen problem field. These concept notes will be shared publicly by Elrha as a final output and can be used by grantees to attract further investment to enable continued investigation. The final scope and structure of the concept notes will be refined in collaboration with the selected cohort of grantees.

The cohort will also co-design a set of recommendations for funders and policymakers informed by the consultation and learning activities throughout their journey.

To achieve the objective for this challenge each grantee will:

- Develop their voice on, and deepen their understanding of, the potential of AI for their own work, developing a concept note which they could use to inform ongoing activity and spark new initiatives.
- Give real time feedback on the learning journey curriculum to support the development of an open access tool for other humanitarian actors.
- Connect with other practitioners, innovators and funders from across the humanitarian system to explore the potential of AI and make collective recommendations to decision makers.

Scope

The following sections outline the scope for this challenge.

Who is eligible

We are deliberately keeping eligibility criteria broad as we want to encourage a diverse range of practitioners to connect with this challenge.

We are seeking practitioners that have a deep understanding of the humanitarian problem they would like to explore and who know enough about the basics of AI and technology that they think AI could be an effective intervention to the problem. They should have experience of supporting or working with humanitarian communities in crisis. We would prefer practitioners with a connection to countries receiving [official development assistance](#) and in particular crisis affected countries. We will take a portfolio approach to selection, ensuring a diverse cohort of grantees.

We welcome expressions of interest from individuals or teams. Teams of no more than 5 people will be considered, and the lead applicant must be part of a registered organisation. The HIF can only provide funding to a legally registered entity so the principal team member must be part of a legally registered organisation. Team members may be from the same, or different organisations, they may also not be employed by an organisation as long as the lead applicant is.

Who is this for:

- Practitioners in an organisation currently working in a humanitarian² context or outside of a humanitarian context but directly involved in crisis response and support. This may include, but is not limited to, humanitarian response organisations (local/national/global), innovators or academics.
- Practitioners who have an awareness of interventions which have been tried previously in the problem area they want to explore and what the opportunities and risks could be if an AI intervention was deployed. Are you aware of what didn't work previously? And/or how an AI intervention potentially could be potentially more effective?
- Those that can fully commit to the learning journey activities.
- Basic computer literacy, competent in MS Office and in using online communication platforms like Zoom. The learning sessions will take place virtually so a stable internet connection will also be needed. Grantees will need to have [an upper intermediate level of spoken English](#). As far as possible we will aim to translate all written materials into French, Spanish and Arabic. Please note this will be done using AI translation tools so may be imperfect However please note Elrha's operational language is English and your application must be in English.

² Humanitarian settings include: Conflict-affected locations (eg, Yemen, Central African Republic, Mali); Natural hazard-driven disasters; Complex emergencies (eg, eastern DRC, northeast Nigeria); Refugee or internally displaced person (IDP) camps/settlements including in protracted crises; Refugees and IDPs in urban settings. We exclude: Countries that are not included in the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) list of official development assistance (ODA) (eg, Greece, including refugee camps); General populations in low- or middle-income countries (LMICs), including those that have been affected by COVID-19 unless also qualifying as a humanitarian crisis setting as above; Other vulnerable population groups such as migrants, people living in informal settlements, or rural communities that are not otherwise affected by a humanitarian crisis.

Defining the problem

Who this isn't for:

- People already working in the AI technology sector. The learning journey will be aimed at facilitating access and engagement.
- Those wanting to develop a specific AI solution.
- Practitioners who are removed from the day-to-day challenges which occur in a humanitarian crisis. We are actively trying to bring together a cohort with a majority of local voices.
- Individuals not part of a registered organisation.

There is no limitation on the **size** or **location** of problem you would like to explore. However, as a guide, we would ask applicants to bear in mind the 6-month timeline given to explore the problem bearing in mind safeguarding and ethical risks and to identify those problems that, if solved, could have the greatest **impact**.

What do we mean by;

Size: We recognise that sometimes a big impact can come from making a relatively small change in a much larger process. Equally there could be a larger more complex problem that, given your experience, you feel AI could intervene effectively with.

Location/scope of problem: Your chosen problem could either be an internally facing organisational problem, for instance around systems, processes or governance, or an external facing problem such as around delivery, development or scale. Please note this is not an exhaustive list. The problem must take place in the humanitarian system, either by being rooted in a humanitarian context or in a humanitarian organisation. We want to keep the learning journey centered on the unique context of the humanitarian system and so would prefer challenges which are unique to the humanitarian sector and not faced by other non-humanitarian organisation.

Impact: When a problem is identified, it is often an indicator that there is a need in a community or team that isn't being met. Understanding the impact of resolving this problem is an important part of defining it, as well as designing a potential solution. We would invite applicants to reflect on;

- What would it look like in a year's time if AI was an effective intervention to the problem identified? Who would it benefit and how? Or what might the potential harms be of responding with AI?
- How long has the problem been occurring, and have other attempts been made to tackle it? Are you aware of what didn't work previously? And/or how an AI intervention potentially could be potentially more effective?
- Are there others experiencing the same problem, i.e., other regions, countries, organisations?
- Are there any AI solutions you are aware of which may resolve the issue?

Please remember **applicants should not have the problem solved** at this stage. That is what the learning journey will support you with.

When defining the problem, you are welcome to refer to the tools available in the [Humanitarian Innovation Guide](#) to support in exploring and defining your problem.

What is the commitment?

Grantees will take part in a learning needs assessment exercise before the learning journey kicks off in June 2024 to help inform the design and delivery of the learning journey.

The learning journey will then be launched with a virtual kickoff session welcoming the cohort in June 2024.

Grantees will be introduced to the curriculum which will be a set of offline materials designed to develop their voice and deepen their understanding of the potential of AI for their own work.

This will be brought to life through online hands-on exercises, group discussions, and practical projects related to the grantees problem brief, supplemented with guest speakers and experts from the field to provide real-world insights and best practices.

A core part of grantee support will be mentorship in the innovation process and to support grantees in developing their concept notes. Grantees will be matched to mentors based on the needs assessment exercise.

We would expect the time commitment to be around **3 days a month**. This will include both attendance at online learning sessions, providing feedback on learning materials and offline learning and concept note development activities. The learning materials will be made publicly available after the learning journey is complete. Please note the time commitment may change slightly once the learning journey design is finalised.

How do I apply?

If you wish to apply, please go to the 'Apply Now' button on the *AI for Humanitarians: Shaping Future Innovation* webpage. There you will be directed to an online application portal, where you will be asked a set of standard questions about you and your project or problem statement.

We then would invite you to submit a 5-7 minute video responding to the following questions.

1. Who are you (or your team) and where in the world are you currently based?
2. What has made you apply for this challenge? How has your experience (or your teams) inspired your application? What excites you most about this opportunity?
3. What problem would you like to explore? Please refer to the 'Defining the Problem' section about and include in your answer the size, location and impact you have identified.
4. What are some of the risks associated with a potential AI response to the problem you want to explore?

Funding available & application timeline

Videos can either be uploaded to a file sharing site and the link submitted or video's can be uploaded directly, allowable file video extensions are: .wmv, .mov, .mpg, .mp4, .m4v, .avi, .swf, .flv. The maximum upload file size is 128 MBytes.

Funding available: up to **£25,000 per grantee for up to 10 grantees***

First round EOI due: **22nd January 2024 15:59 GMT**

Shortlisting: **22nd January – 29th January 2024**

Proposal development workshop (optional): **1st February 2024**

Final proposal due: **14th February 2024 15:59 GMT**

Decision (subject to due diligence): **22nd March 2024**

Learning Journey: **June - November 2024**

Final Deliverable: **December 2024**

*final funding awarded will be based on the budget submitted as part of the final proposal.

It is essential that all final deliverables are completed by December 2024. The final proposal form will be made available once shortlisting is complete. The final proposal will build on the expression of interest questions and will be proportionate the level of funding on offer.

We anticipate shortlisting approx. 20 applications, and those that are shortlisted will be invited to attend an optional proposal development workshop. In this workshop attendees will hear from AI experts on the latest insights and trends and supported to further refine and develop their problem statements and their scope for impact.

Deliverables

Required

- Grantees will be asked to submit reflections at the beginning, middle and end in order for us to evaluate and better support their learning journey.
- Final concept note.
- Standard grantee reporting to Elrha (light touch given the duration and size of the grants).

Optional

- Additional publication and dissemination activities including academic articles, blogs, conference participation.

Policies & practices

Applicants should demonstrate compliance with all necessary standards and procedures relevant to the context. See [additional application guidance](#) for further details.

HOW ELRHA WILL SUPPORT

We are committed to accompanying you during the full lifecycle of this project and to offer non-financial support around dissemination and fundraising activities. At Elrha, we are always exploring new ways to engage and influence the humanitarian system in the opportunities offered by humanitarian innovation. We will work alongside grantees to identify opportunities

to amplify their voice through our website, newsletters and next year. One of these platforms will be Elrha's planned Innovation Forum in November 2024.

APPLICATION PROCESS

Challenge Call Guidelines

Application

Complete an application form and submit a video pitch via our online platform.

Shortlisting Process

Application forms will be reviewed against the following criteria to help the HIF understand the project problem definition and vision for impact, and identify any questions or concerns that need to be addressed before progressing with the grant:

- Eligibility of applicant based on criteria outlined in 'Who is eligible' section.
- Assessment of the problem definition as communicated and projection of the potential impact of the project on the humanitarian system.
- Awareness of the opportunities and risks an AI response could hold.
- Scale and ambition of proposed project.
- Diversity of perspective – will bring a unique and experienced voice into the process.
- Readiness to discover – able to commit to the time and effort needed to take part in the learning journey.

Your application and pitch video will be reviewed by Elrha over a short period of time as per each the timeline above. The review will focus on evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the application against the criteria outlined in these Guidelines and a final shortlist will be confirmed.

Proposal Development Workshop

The shortlisted applicants will then be invited to take part in a proposal development workshop. This will take place on **Thursday 1st February** and will last for 2.5 hours. Applicants will hear from AI experts on the latest insights and trends to support them in completing their final proposal, including the development of workplans and budgets. They will then be supported to further refine and develop their problem statements and their scope for impact.

Final proposals will then be submitted two weeks later.

Technical Review

Final proposals will then be reviewed by a technical experts against the following criteria;

- Alignment with the aims of the challenge
- High quality problem definition exhibiting high degree of knowledge and expertise.
- Feasibility and value for money relating to the workplan and budget.
- Good potential for impact in the humanitarian sector as outlined in the 'defining the problem' section.
- Degree of understanding of the ethics and other risks an AI response could hold.

From the technical review stage approx. 15 applications will be put forward to the funding committee.

Funding Committee & Decision

The final proposals will be reviewed by the HIF Funding Committee. The HIF may contact applicants for further queries during this process as well.

WE LOOK FORWARD TO RECEIVING YOUR APPLICATION!

For any questions, get in touch with Shirin Maani s.maani@elrha.org.