About Us. The Agency Fund is a nonprofit partnership investing in ideas and organizations that help people navigate toward a better future. We envision a coach, a mentor, a counselor for all.

We maintain an open funding window to identify research and innovation concepts within the general scope of our approach. We also partner with funders to issue more targeted calls for proposals (such as this one) in specific topic areas.

Contextual Background. Much of the philanthropic conversation around AI has been focusing on its risks: its potential to manipulate or mislead people, render their capacities obsolete, and more generally diminish human agency.

However, AI also has the potential to augment human agency. The creation of The Agency Fund was motivated by a rich body of encouraging evidence on the impacts of social workers, role models, mentors, and similar "support personas" that help people navigate their own lives.[1] The unifying idea behind these approaches is to empower people – augmenting their decision-making, rather than over-riding it.

Digital technology has long held the promise of scalable solutions through cost-effective personalized communication.[2-3] Now, with recent advancements in AI and the rise of large language models (LLMs), the vision of providing free and interactive counsel to a broad audience is coming into sharp relief.

Many Agency Fund grantees are already attempting to use LLMs to specific use cases in human development – often by building on chatbot platforms, such as turn.io and glific.org. For example:

- Myna Mahila Foundation is testing an AI bot to help young women in India resolve doubts about sexual and reproductive health;
- The Apprentice Project is testing approaches to use AI to offers school kids career advice and opportunities for creative exploration;

- SameSame is testing ways to tailor mental health support to LGBT+ youth living in hostile places;
- CareerVillage is piloting AI-augmented career counseling on its platform;
- Rocket Learning is building an AI coach tailored to parents and caregivers in India;
- Family Empowerment Media uses AI to augment its nurse-staffed helpline;
- UC Berkeley and Busara Center are evaluating variants of LLM-based decision support for Kenyan micro-entrepreneurs.

Yet generative AI is still far from optimized for use cases in human development settings. LLMs are not predominantly trained on data from low-income contexts, nor do they communicate in ways that are optimized to engage with people in poverty.

We are interested in projects that capitalize on recent leaps in generative AI to deliver personalized, interactive support, especially in lower-income settings. We are especially interested in generating evidence that helps determine the cost-effectiveness of such approaches.

What and How We Plan to Fund. We seek to fund 6-12 month projects that leverage AI to help people navigate their lives, ultimately enabling them to improve their economic, health, or educational outcomes. We are particularly interested in projects that meet the following criteria:

- **Performance Data & Evidence Generating.** The project comes with a credible (likely experimental) approach to assess performance on user engagement, proximate outcomes (e.g., beliefs / knowledge), as well as downstream social & development outcomes (e.g., educational or economic metrics).
- **Agency Enhancing.** The innovation embraces people's consciousness and helps them hone their beliefs and mental models without over-riding their judgment. We are interested in academic innovation (e.g. in the psychological, behavioral, neuroscience, decision, economic, or computer sciences), but also

in specific use cases (say, helping US domestic violence survivors escape abusive relationships; women in Nigeria navigate safe childbirth; students in Peru plan their educational journeys; Indian citizens make sense of their entitlements; etc.)

- **Safe and Responsible.** The innovation identifies and commits to appropriate guardrails to manage the risk of misinformation, privacy violations, and other harm. Also, the research complies with ethical frameworks on human subject research.
- **Scalable.** There is a credible path to scale (1m+ users) via policy mechanisms, networks, or a business model.

We expect that the most competitive projects will be contextually adapted and tailored to specific populations and decision challenges. This could involve the use of dedicated training data; tailored user experiences; or other adaptations.

While our partnerships and collaborations can assist promising projects in bridging certain scientific and technological gaps, a thorough understanding of the local context is indispensable.

Applicants will need to demonstrate intimate familiarity with the populations and decision challenges they aim to support.

We expect to allocate $2-4M to this funding round. We expect that most projects will be pilots in the $200k-$400k range. The deadline for submissions is 22 December 2023 at 11:59PM San Francisco Time. For FAQs and to apply, visit www.agency.fund

Readings.

1. The Agency Fund (2021): "Putting Data, Media, And Technology In The Service Of Human Agency", White Paper
2. A Bandura (2002): "Growing Primacy of Human Agency in Adaptation and Change in the Electronic Era", European Psychologist 7(1)
3. R Fabregas, M Kremer, F Schilbach (2019): "Realizing the Potential of Digital Development: The Case of Agricultural Advice", Science 366(6471)

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