Data Enrichment Work and AI Labor in the Global South

We invite proposals that will research the invisible and undervalued workforce in artificial intelligence (AI) and their working conditions in the Global South. This research will build on the approach to AI and labor outlined in the Global AI Research Agenda and will support USAID's future efforts in programming and advocacy to promote an equitable and dignified future for the workers supporting AI.

Background

The rapid development of AI, particularly generative AI, relies on millions of workers engaged in *data enrichment* -- curating, labeling, and annotating data to train AI models. This emerging category of labor also includes content moderators, who are often tasked with defining the boundaries of permissible content on social media platforms, as well as other new forms of AI-supporting labor. These workers often work in precarious contract jobs or pay-per-task environments in the Global South and are virtually invisible in the global economy. Little is known about the size, demographics, or working conditions of this workforce, especially in the Global South. Yet, the emergence of the AI labor economy has significant implications for developing regions, and it is not yet well understood how these workers contribute to the global AI industry and to the economies in which they live, and what measures might help to protect them.

Researchers and policymakers often conceptualize today's AI industry in terms of an *AI value chain* -- an interconnected system including software and hardware vendors, cloud service providers, model developers and deployers, and firms offering AI-specific services in testing, auditing, and security. Data enrichment workers, and the companies that employ or contract with them, are key nodes in this network of actors, as they both rely on data and communications infrastructure for the global distribution of AI-supporting tasks and increase the value of data and models deployed and used by others.

Goals

USAID seeks proposals from qualified research teams that will explore the data enrichment labor market in the Global South and its role in global AI value chains. Teams are strongly encouraged to develop unique proposals and research questions drawing on their expertise or experience. Proposal scopes can include but are not limited to:

- The size, demographics, and geography of the workforce supporting and enabling AI technologies, including the structure of data value chains for AI companies and the role of workers at each stage of the value chain.

- The socio-economic and working conditions faced by workers in the AI value chain, with an emphasis on specific geographies in the Global South, including psychosocial and workplace conditions.
- The economic or contractual relationships among the companies that comprise the AI value chain and how the terms impact worker remuneration and working conditions.
- AI's impact on the remuneration and working conditions of data enrichment workers, including their relationship to pay-per-task platforms and other contracting models that may play roles outside of the AI industry.
- Evidence from practices promoting just and equitable AI labor that involves collaboration between governments, donors, labor unions, civil society, and the private sector.

We encourage multidisciplinary approaches that combine sociotechnical, ethnographic, and economic analyses.

Who Should Apply

We invite applications from researchers and practitioners across the social sciences, computer science, economics, and related fields. Collaborative proposals from cross-disciplinary teams prioritizing engagement with local partners and communities are especially encouraged.

Applicants should join the LASER Pulse Network before submitting their application. They are also encouraged to take the training on Gender and Research Translation and integrate its concepts into their proposals.

Application Process and Selection Process

USAID and LASER PULSE seek applications from teams that meet the qualifications, expertise, and experience identified in this call for proposals.

Individual applicants and teams must apply under an umbrella institution that can receive U.S. federal funds, i.e., an institution registered on https://sam.gov/content/home with a UEI number provided by the U.S. government, or an institution in the process of registration on https://sam.gov/content/home to acquire UEI. Applicants with an active SAM.gov registration will be given priority, though applicants with a SAM.gov application in process will also be considered.

Applicants should submit a complete proposal using the format below. Proposals must be in English, with narrative portions prepared in Microsoft Word or Open Office format, using Calibri font, size 11, or similar typeset in single line spacing. They must include the following sections:

- **Title**
- **Research Narrative** (max. 3 pages) detailing the research question(s), geographical focus, methodology, and expected contributions and outcomes, with a description of the intended research outputs.
- **Budget Outline** for project expenses, not to exceed $280,000.

- **Organization Profile(s)** (max. 2 pages per organization).
- **Work Plan and Timeline** for project completion, discussing how the team will complete proposed activities, including the project's management structure and research outputs. A project timeline of 6-24 months is recommended, beginning after the Program Description (SOW) document and any consulting agreements are signed, but is open to discussion.
- **Team Background and Relevant Expertise** completed via [this worksheet](#) with the following information:
  - Tab 1: Completed for each member of the Project Team
  - Tab 2: List publications or outputs that demonstrate experience relevant to the request in this call for proposals. Research outputs should involve primary or secondary data collection. Outputs may include peer-reviewed publications, conference papers, presentations, working papers, journal articles, policy documents, or other media and publications.

Proposal submission information and deadline
- Applicants should submit their (1) Proposal and (2) Project Team background and relevant expertise through Qualtrics [at this link](#).
- Prospective applicants can submit any questions concerning the call for proposals. Questions should be sent to Ross Meyers rbmeyers@purdue.edu with the Subject Line: "Questions for LASER PULSE, Data Enrichment Work and AI Labor". Questions should be received no later than December 13, 2024, at 5:00 pm US Eastern time. Replies will be posted to the LASER Pulse website by December 20, 2024.
- Applications will be due on January 31, 2025, at 5:00 pm US Eastern time.
- The announcement of the selected team will be released on February 28, 2025.

Evaluation Criteria

Proposals will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

- **Relevance**: Does the proposal address key questions about data enrichment and AI labor in the Global South?
- **Innovation:** Does the proposal include novel or innovative approaches?
- **Research team credibility:** Does the research team have the background, skills, and relationships necessary to succeed in this project?
- **Feasibility**: Is the project timeline realistic, and does the budget align with the research goals?
- **Impact**: How will the proposed research contribute to understanding AI's impacts on labor, and how might it influence policy or practices?
- **Methodological Rigor**: Does the proposal demonstrate sound methodological approaches that are appropriate for the research questions, particularly sociotechnical, participatory, or ethnographic methods?