



## Call for Concepts: Research and Innovation on Mental Health

### About Us

The Agency Fund invests in ideas and organizations that leverage data, media, and technology to support people in the navigation of economic and life choices. Our innovation investments focus on time-limited projects that pilot, experimentally test, and iteratively scale & improve specific innovations that advance human agency. We welcome concepts that fall within the general scope of [our approach](#). We also issue calls for concepts (such as this one) to discover opportunities in selected thematic areas. This call is issued in partnership with [CRI Foundation](#), a health sector funder focused on lasting solutions in Africa. CRI is particularly interested in initiatives that leverage rigorous evidence and existing distribution networks to advance health outcomes cost-effectively and at large scale.

### Background for this Call for Concepts

Poor mental health plays a critical role in cycles of poverty and suffering worldwide. Depression and anxiety, for example, are leading contributors to the global disease burden. They are especially prevalent in lower-income settings – partly explained by the fact that poverty is a causal driver of mental disorder, and vice versa.<sup>1</sup> Sub-clinical or non-clinical manifestations of poor mental health (e.g. high levels of stress and isolation) are also widespread.

A range of therapeutic approaches can improve mental health. For example, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), which seeks to help patients disrupt and reconsider negative beliefs about the world and themselves, has been shown to be effective in treating depression and anxiety as well as trauma and substance use.<sup>2,3</sup> It has also been linked to the improvement of poverty outcomes, even among populations who are not clinically depressed.<sup>4</sup>

There is a large unmet need for psychotherapy as well as diagnostic and preventative services in resource-

constrained settings. A range of innovative ideas have been designed to narrow this gap. For example:

- [StrongMinds](#) deploys a range of approaches, such as group-based therapy and teletherapy, in Uganda.
- [Shamiri Institute](#) builds and tests culturally tailored mental health interventions and works to implement them in Kenyan schools.
- Several approaches to perinatal depression counseling have been adopted to a peer-to-peer format (mothers helping mothers).<sup>5</sup>


We are interested in any approach that advances evidence-oriented, scalable mental health services in low-income countries - whether novel in approach, or novel in the setting. Our interests span diagnostics, treatment, and prevention; and work with children, adolescents, as well as adults. We are particularly interested in maternal depression; in sub-Saharan Africa; and in approaches that leverage technology or existing service delivery infrastructure (e.g. CHWs, schools) to achieve precision at scale. While the focus of this call is on approaches that fit the Agency Fund's framework (i.e., directly engage the conscious decision-making of the most affected people), we will consider projects that include other approaches to changing mental health outcomes if they involve research to evaluate alternatives.

### What and How We Fund

This call supports research and innovation projects:

- A Pilot round is suitable for untested ideas. The expected output is a proof-of-concept. The maximum contribution is \$200k.
- Advanced funding rounds are suitable for ideas with a degree of existing evidence or scale. The expected outcomes are greater evidence and greater scale. There are no defined contribution limits.

The strongest applications will demonstrate:



## Call for Concepts: Research and Innovation on Mental Health

- A commitment to rigorous evaluation with well-identified causal impact;
- Innovation in the use of data, technology, or existing service delivery infrastructure to improve the precision of diagnostics and treatment, or to achieve cost-effective scale more generally.
- A path to scale, a framework for measuring cost and benefits at scale, and ambitious timelines.
- Presence in, or relevance to, lower-income countries (especially Sub-Saharan Africa).

This call will close on 1 March 2022 at 11:59PM Pacific Time. For FAQs and to apply, visit [www.agency.fund](http://www.agency.fund)

### Citations

1. Ridley M, Rao G, Schilbach F, Patel V (2020): Poverty, depression, and anxiety: Causal evidence and mechanisms. *Science* 370(6522)
2. Beck AT, Rush, AJ, Shaw BF; Emery B (1987). *Cognitive therapy of depression*. Guilford Press
3. Ray LA et al (2020): Combined pharmacotherapy and cognitive behavioral therapy for adults with alcohol or substance use disorders. *JAMA* 3(6)
4. Barker N et al (2021): Mental health therapy as a core strategy for increasing human capital: evidence from Ghana. *NBER Working Paper 29407*
5. Huang R et al (2020): Effectiveness of peer support intervention on perinatal depression: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Affective Disorders* 276