UNICEF Innovation Fund Call for AAC Technologies

The UNICEF Innovation Fund is looking for start-ups that are building the next generation of open source **augmentative and alternative communication technologies.** AAC technologies help people with communication impairments supplement or replace existing speech, writing or nonverbal communication to express ideas, thoughts and needs.

The Fund is accepting applications **until 21 July 2017**, and will build a **cohort** of leading start-ups working in this space. The Fund provides early-stage seed funding to start-ups with a strong team and a clear path to impact on children's lives.

As a part of this cohort, you'll be part of a community of start-ups working on AAC technologies and have a dedicated adviser to support you on appropriate open source licenses, community building, and networking with leaders in the disabilities space. The Fund also provides a number of other benefits to selected start-ups, see our FAQ for more information.

What we're looking for:
We are looking to invest in AAC technologies which employ a **universal design approach**[1] and leverage **frontier technologies** such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, virtual and augmented reality and data science.

One example is **Avaz**, a robust AAC app created in India for children who are nonverbal or who have difficulty communicating. The platform works offline and has a special keyboard with picture-assisted text prediction, 15,000 symbols and images, a vocabulary search bar, 4 voices and custom photos, etc. Avaz has been designed to address communication impairments of multiple disabilities, including Autism, Down Syndrome, Angelman Syndrome and Aspergers.

With the application of universal design and frontier technologies, we believe these technologies can be accessible to and benefit the most marginalized communities.

See our FAQ on AAC technologies for more information.

Why do we need more solutions?
Depending on the type of disability, a child may need any number of assistive devices or software. According to the World Health Organization, however, in many low-income countries only 5-15 percent of the people who need assistive technology are able to obtain it.[2] Children are often less likely than adults to access assistive technology. An accessible environment is essential if children with disabilities to enjoy their right to participate in their communities and education.

Who can apply?
  1) Start-ups registered in one of UNICEF's programme countries (see complete list here) and have a working, open source prototype (hardware, content or software). Check out eligibility

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[1] Universal design is defined as the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. UNICEF State of the World's Children 2013 Report: *Children with Disabilities.* https://www.unicef.org/sowc2013/files/SWCR2013_ENG_Lo_res_24_Apr_2013.pdf

[2] UNICEF State of the World's Children Report.

criteria for the Innovation Fund under www.unicefinnovationfund.org/#/submit and find an overview of the process here.

2) Applications are accepted on a rolling basis. To be considered for the AAC-focused cohort, we ask you to submit your application by **July 15th, 2017**.

3) For this cohort, we are looking for:
    a) Startups with a working prototype (hardware, software or content) leveraging frontier technologies for AAC.
    b) Startups using universal design processes to make their products accessible to everyone.

What does the UNICEF Innovation Fund provide?
Seed funding: the Fund provides $50-90,000 in equity-free seed funding. You might need a small amount of money to get your prototype to the stage where the company has proof that the solution works for other people. Maybe another developer or two are needed, design help to communicate what the project can do or some server space. Refactoring something into a new language because the initial one won't scale. Testing it in a new area. Getting some data points.

The UNICEF Innovation Fund can help to support the acceleration of your company's work. The next stage after that proof would be pursuing more funding (this could be private sector investment or grant-funding, or other; depending on the type of technology and solution).

Product and technology development: Receiving investment from the Innovation Fund also provides access to the UNICEF Innovation Ventures team. The team provides technical assistance in emerging technology areas, which is accessible to companies receiving investment. In addition, you can also join a technology focused cohort (e.g AAC technologies cohort). As part of a cohort, you receive support from a dedicated adviser who can help you select the most appropriate open source license, help create a community around your product and network with leaders in your space. You will also be directly connected with other start-ups working on similar solutions, exchange lessons learned and critical data.

Growing grow your business: the UNICEF Venture Fund taps into a network of mentors and advisers who can help you develop your business model and strategy. We invest in companies with a sustainable approach that will ultimately grow your business and profit. UNICEF Ventures also facilitates access to networks of partners, funders and investors that can help scale your solutions after this early-stage investment. Through partnerships with leading accelerators in your region, UNICEF facilitates access to business support.

Maximising impact for children: As the world's leading organisation for children, UNICEF has experts across its Country Offices and partners who can advise on the development of your solution, how to assess its impact and partnerships needed to reach more users.

Check out www.unicefinnovationfund.org for more information