



**science & innovation**

Department  
Science and Innovation  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



**BRICS STI Framework Programme**  
**Response to COVID-19 pandemic coordinated call**  
**for BRICS multilateral projects 2020**

**Request for Applications (RFA)**

**SAMRC/DSI-RFA-01-2020**

**1 July 2020**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Covid-19 pandemic caused by the coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, is a major global health challenge at present. BRICS countries, ie. Brazil, Russian Federation, India, China and South Africa account for more than 27% of the total global Covid-19 burden (<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/>), with active cases and mortality rising at a rapid rate.

There are no effective anti-Covid-19 therapeutics and vaccines currently available. At the global level, several pharmaceutical and biotech companies, university research groups, health research organisations, etc are developing vaccine and drug candidates for Covid-19 which are in various stages of preclinical and clinical research. There are also several existing drugs and vaccines undergoing clinical trials that are being repurposed for Covid-19.

In response to this pandemic and in the absence of treatments and preventative vaccines, the BRICS STI Framework Programme (<http://brics-sti.org/>) is launching a call for multilateral basic, applied and innovation research projects in an effort to facilitate cooperation among the researchers and institutions in the five BRICS countries.

The South African Department of Science and Technology (DSI) is providing funding for project activities in South Africa. The South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) is the participating funding organisation in South Africa.

## **RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT THEMATIC AREAS**

Proposals in the following five thematic areas will be considered:

1. Research and development of new technologies/tools for diagnosing COVID-19
2. Research and development of COVID-19 vaccines and drugs, including repurposing of available vaccines and drugs
3. Genomic sequencing of SARS-CoV-2 and studies on the epidemiology and mathematical modelling of the COVID-19 pandemic
4. AI, ICT and HPC oriented research for COVID-19 drugs design, vaccine development, treatment, clinical trials and public health infrastructures and systems
5. Epidemiological studies and clinical trials to evaluate the overlap of SARS-CoV-2 and comorbidities, especially tuberculosis.

## **DURATION AND START DATE OF PROJECTS**

Projects will be supported for a maximum period of two (2) years. The official start date of the project, expected during the first and second quarters of 2021, will be decided through consultation between the SAMRC, DSI and the relevant funding agencies in the other BRICS countries.

## **WHO MAY APPLY?**

This is an open call for proposals from researchers based at R&D organisations, South African universities, science councils (including the SAMRC) and other organisations, including:

- Any institution approved by the Minister of Higher Education Science and Innovation for NRF funding
- Locally registered not-for profit research organisations whose primary purpose is to conduct research and/or product development – such entities may be subject to due diligence before the award of funds
- South African private/for-profit small and medium enterprises involved in developing and products (solutions) – such entities may be subject to due diligence before the award of funds

Foreign entities are not eligible to apply for funding through this RFA but may, in some cases, be included as collaborators if they provide a service, technology or capability that is not available among the project partners or among other eligible organizations.

In addition to the above, applicants/principal investigators (PIs) must be South African citizens or permanent residence holders. While there is no limit to the number of applications submitted per organization, PIs may only submit one application each as the PI but may be involved in more than one application if listed as a co-investigator.

## HOW DO I APPLY?

All applications must be completed on the SAMRC/DSI application form posted on the SAMRC website or obtainable from the Project Administrator, Arlene Smith ([arlene.smith@mrc.ac.za](mailto:arlene.smith@mrc.ac.za)). The length of the application should not exceed 15 single spaced pages, excluding annexures. The application must address the following areas:

### i. Research and development question (max 2 pages)

- Give a brief description of the research priority in the aforementioned focus area(s) that will be addressed by the proposed project

### ii. Rationale and motivation (max 3 pages)

- Provide a background and scientific rationale for the proposed research, outlining, where appropriate, the theoretical framework that forms the basis of the research, and discussing how the proposed research will address the research priority identified above, and
- Indicate how the proposed research is expected to contribute to an integrated, cross disciplinary, collaborative research programme advancing health-relevant knowledge and/or contribute to improvements in Covid-19 health outcomes.

### iii. Research aims and objectives (max 2 pages)

- Outline the main aim(s) of the proposed R&D activities and specify the research objectives that are to be achieved.

### iv. Research design and methods (max 6 pages)

- Noting that the overarching goal of the programme is to support rapid, innovative, inter-disciplinary, collaborative research projects that address both South African and BRICS countries Covid-19 health problems, give an account of the overall research approach and the following:

- specifics of the research design, including any multi-disciplinary aspects as well as stakeholder interaction/participation;
- the research methods and/or experimental techniques to be employed, including human subjects protection plan for clinical studies;
- the data collection and analysis strategies / approaches to be adopted;
- the statistical treatment and analysis of data, and
- responsibilities and timelines in doing the work (who will do what when?), including communication and collaboration activities

Applicants should give a detailed account, as required above, of the targeted outcomes in each of the two years of their proposed research. The R&D design and methods should be well aligned with the stated research aims and objectives.

**v. Expected outputs/outcomes/impact (max 2 pages)**

- Outline the expected direct and/or indirect outputs/outcomes/impact of the research in terms of the collaborative programme goals outlined above. It includes:
  - the advancement of scientific/health knowledge;
  - human capacity development (eg., number of post-graduates trained and post-docs mentored);
  - specific research outputs (e.g. products and publications in high impact journals), and
  - Contributions the research is envisaged to make to improvements in health and/or policy outcomes.

The onus is on the applicant to find their own research collaborators in the partner countries. Only common/joint proposal(s) will be considered.

**WHICH ACTIVITIES MAY I APPLY FOR?**

Each selected project will be funded for a maximum period of two (2) years, subject to the submission of an annual report and satisfactory progress for continuation of funding. To facilitate the objectives of the joint project, labour costs, consumables, research expenses, project related visits of South African and BRICS country researchers to the counterpart country may be supported.

Funding under this programme will cover the following expenses related to the project:

- Support for research expenses: Expenditure by the project team in their country would be provided by the respective BRICS country funding agency.
- Institutional overhead will be determined in accordance with specific research and development programme related policies of each institution.
- While the exact nature of expenditure is not fixed, the following may **NOT** be funded from this allocation: purchase or construction of a building, rental costs for space that is owned by the institution, recruitment costs for staff, and purchase of office furniture.

**HOW MUCH MAY I APPLY FOR?**

The funding that you may apply for from the SAMRC is capped at R3 million per year per project.

## HOW ARE APPLICATIONS EVALUATED?

There will be a three-step review and evaluation process, viz,

- Internal SAMRC/DSI screening for responsiveness to all the specified administrative and procedural provisions required in the RFA,
- Peer-review to assess the scientific merit (and other review criteria as specified below) of applications found to be responsive to the provisions of this RFA, and
- Based on the results of the peer-review, a joint decision by the participating funding organizations will be made regarding the selected proposals to be co-funded.

### Internal screening

All applications will be screened jointly by the SAMRC & DSI for completeness and responsiveness to the goals of the RFA and its administrative requirements/provisions. If the application is found to be incomplete or unresponsive to the provisions described in the RFA, the application will be returned to the applicant without further review.

### Peer-review of qualifying applications

Responsive applications will be reviewed by recognised experts in the scientific field(s) of research and the societal relevance represented by the proposals received. These experts will evaluate each proposal based on the following criteria:

- **Relevance and clarity of objectives** in relation to the aims of the call;
- **Scientific quality of the proposal** (scientific excellence of the proposal in terms of innovative approach, originality and expected progress beyond the state of the art, availability and quality of existing data, comparative perspective and multidisciplinary);
- **Quality of the project consortium** (international competitiveness of participants in the field(s), previous work and expertise of the participants, added value of the transnational collaboration, participation of early-stage career researchers);
- **Feasibility of project plan** (relation of work packages to proposal themes and aims, quality of work plan and time schedule, balanced participation of project partners, quality and efficiency of the coordination and management, scientific justification and adequateness of the requested budget and risk assessment); and
- **Potential impact on society and citizens** (response to actual societal needs, providing evidence for policy makers and practitioners; early integration of relevant stakeholders, ensuring societal relevance over the course of the project and its dissemination).

Consideration will also be given to the training of students and young researchers achieved through research and the transfer of knowledge and know-how aimed at socio-economic development. The integration of young researchers and students, and the exchange of post-doctoral researchers are encouraged, as is the involvement of students and researchers from previously disadvantaged communities.

## PROJECT FOLLOW-UP AND REPORTING

PIs must submit common/joint scientific and financial annual reports from the year of receipt of the grant. A final scientific and financial report must be submitted no later than 3 months after the end of the project. Reports must be completed on the template provided by the SAMRC.

## SCIENTIFIC AND REGULATORY COMPLIANCE

### *Ethics*

PIs are required to maintain the highest ethical and safety standards in conducting the research, particularly when human and animal subjects are involved. It is the responsibility of the PIs to comply with all relevant regulations in this regard, including those of the institution at which the research is carried out. Applicants should make mention in the application if the project lacks ethical problems, needs certain ethical considerations, will be submitted to an ethical review committee, or has been approved by an ethical review committee.

An ethics approval certificate from a National Health Research Ethics Committee approved Institutional Ethics Committee (and the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA), if necessary) must be submitted to the SAMRC in respect of successful applications before funding can be released.

## PUBLICATIONS AND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

The PIs and their project teams shall jointly publish research results from the joint research project in the appropriate form and according to the standards of the SAMRC & DSI. The joint publications by the researchers will mention the funding support from the SAMRC, DSI and other participating funding agencies as appropriate.

Publications and any other intellectual properties rights generated out of the project should be jointly shared and published after mutual agreement between the collaborators. In the interest of encouraging meaningful collaborations, the collaborating parties are strongly encouraged to engage in appropriate discussions and negotiations to determine issues such as ownership of any arising intellectual properties and each party's rights and obligations under the collaboration.

Funding by the SAMRC is subject to the provisions of the *SAMRC Intellectual Property Policy* (<http://innovation.mrc.ac.za/policy.htm>) as well as the Intellectual Property Rights from Publicly Financed Research and Development Act 51 of 2008 (<http://www.info.gov.za/view/DownloadFileAction?id=94343>).

The SAMRC may require the South African PI in the future, in the event of any intellectual property being developed from the project, to sign an intellectual property sharing agreement for each project funded by the SAMRC as part of the acceptance of this grant.

## WHEN IS THE CLOSING DATE FOR APPLICATIONS?

The closing date for applications is **20 August 2020 at 23h59m**. Applications received after this date will not be considered for funding. Table 1 provides an outline of the stages and timelines for the application and award process.

**Table 1. Proposed application and award timelines**

Stages	Date/period
1. Publication of call	1 July 2020
2. Deadline dates: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Submitting applications to SAMRC</li><li>• <b>Joint Application Form (JAF)</b> (link for download: <a href="http://brics-sti.org/files/JAF_BRICS_Call_2020.docx">http://brics-sti.org/files/JAF_BRICS_Call_2020.docx</a>) must also be submitted by the Project Coordinator to the Call Secretariat through the online <b>BRICS STI Framework Programme Application Management System (BRICS AMS)</b> at <a href="http://ams.rfbr.ru/BRICS">http://ams.rfbr.ru/BRICS</a></li></ul>	20 August 2020 18 August 2020
3. Evaluation period (indicative)	September 2020 – November 2020
4. Feedback to applicants (indicative): Official grant award letter (award decision)	1 December 2020
5. Grant funding agreements finalised (indicative)	31 March 2021

## IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Please take note the following important information:

- i. The SAMRC will utilise the results of the peer review to determine which meritorious applications would be recommended for funding. The SAMRC may also consider additional factors such as a balance in the range of topics supported in making its final determinations;
- ii. The SAMRC may seek to verify any information provided by applicant's through independent research or by third parties approved by the SAMRC;
- iii. The SAMRC may use text, video or other visual representation submitted by applicants on the SAMRC website or on SAMRC materials for publicity and/or public awareness;
- iv. The SAMRC will provide written summaries of the review findings for those applications found responsive and submitted to the review process. Note that reviewers' names will not be shared with the applicants;
- v. The SAMRC reserves the right to amend or withdraw the RFA at any time;
- vi. Successful awards may be subject to addressing reviewer comments and/or negotiation of project plans and budget;
- vii. Grants will be paid to the institution/organization where the PI is employed, as set out in a funding agreement to be concluded between the parties;
- viii. No grant funds will be paid over until proof of the necessary ethics and regulatory approvals for the project have been provided to the SAMRC. Should the investigators fail to

obtain the necessary approvals within a reasonable time period, the SAMRC reserves the right to withdraw the award.

#### WHERE CAN I OBTAIN MORE INFORMATION?

Please direct your requests for information and questions/queries to:

SAMRC	BRICS STI Programme/Covid-19 call
<p><b>Dr Niresh Bhagwandin</b> Strategic Research Initiatives South African Medical Research Council Phone: +27 (0) 21 938 0652 email: <a href="mailto:niresh.bhagwandin@mrc.ac.za">niresh.bhagwandin@mrc.ac.za</a></p> <p><b>Ms Arlene Smith</b> Strategic Research Initiatives South African Medical Research Council Phone: +27 (0) 21 938 0653 email: <a href="mailto:arlene.smith@mrc.ac.za">arlene.smith@mrc.ac.za</a></p>	<p><b>Mr Yaroslav Sorokotyaga</b> Division Director International Relations Department Russian Foundation for Basic Research Tel: +7 499 941 0196 E-mail: <a href="mailto:ysorokot@rfbr.ru">ysorokot@rfbr.ru</a></p>