



Request for Applications (RFA)
South African National Health Research Enterprise:
Research in Health Systems

SAMRC-RFA-GIPD-04-2026

Release Date: 12 August 2026

Closing Date: 16 October 2026

1. Introduction and Background

The National Health Research Enterprise (NHRE) Programme is an initiative of the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) to fill a gap left by the substantial reduction in international funding available to the South African health research ecosystem. The NHRE is supported by funding from the SAMRC, National Treasury, through the National Department of Health, Gates Foundation and Wellcome Trust. It is founded on a shared commitment to retaining the research infrastructure and high-calibre cadre of clinicians and scientists who have led pioneering research and innovation that has been impactful, not just for South Africa, but for the whole world.

The National Health Research Enterprise comprises, inter alia, the publicly funded universities, science councils and associated research institutes in South Africa that have led the development of innovations in prevalent diseases that impact the country and have made fundamental contributions to discovery, non-communicable diseases and health systems research. Over many years, South African scientists have contributed immensely to the improvement of health outcomes of infants, people living with HIV and tuberculosis, and people with non-communicable diseases, and to changing global policy, guidelines and disease management.

A robust national health research ecosystem:

- Enables timely responses to public health emergencies.
- Supports evidence-based policy formulation.
- Encourages local innovation and technology transfer.
- Builds global scientific competitiveness.
- Promotes socioeconomic development through knowledge-intensive jobs.

Therefore, it is absolutely imperative to ensure viability and sustainability of the South African health research ecosystem. The vision of the NHRE programme is *to ensure a thriving sovereign, resilient, innovative and impactful national research enterprise that advances public health, drives scientific excellence, and supports sustainable growth.*

The SAMRC will support the NHRE over the next 3 years through a series of Requests for Applications (RFAs) that collectively seek to ensure viability, sustainability, independence and advancement of the health research ecosystem in South Africa as well as retain critical infrastructure and scientific talent. This Request for Applications (RFA) is specifically to support health systems research that addresses priority needs of major public health importance.

South Africa continues to face a quadruple burden of disease with substantial associated risk factors. Infectious and non-infectious diseases and conditions are frequently managed through vertical, disease-specific programmes that were not designed to serve people living with multiple, co-occurring conditions, do not necessarily take advantage of shared resources and processes to maximize efficiency and coverage, and are seldom tailored to key target populations, resulting in fragmented care and uneven access. Further, despite the substantial body of knowledge produced by the National Health Research Enterprise, efficient translation of this knowledge into policy, practice, and financing or service-delivery reform remains limited. Health systems research is an interdisciplinary field that is key to bridging this gap and to studying how health services can be more effectively delivered and coverage, quality, and equity can be improved. This RFA is intended to support research and innovation that strengthens the systems, structures and processes that determine whether care reaches people equitably, efficiently and sustainably, with a focus on local relevance, translation into policy and practice, and long-term sustainability of the public health system.

2. Funding Opportunity Description

This RFA invites applications from eligible South African researchers and institutions for projects that generate knowledge, evidence, tools, innovations, platforms, interventions or implementation models to address priority health system gaps. Applications should be aligned with South Africa's health priorities and demonstrate clear potential to contribute to improved health outcomes, strengthened research capacity, equitable access to quality healthcare and public health impact.

Applicants may only submit one proposal as Principal Investigator but may be a co-investigator on other applications. The RFA will support three-year projects up to R2 Million per annum or a maximum total of R6 Million over 3 years. Successful projects should expect to start from approximately March/April 2027. All budgets must be realistic and well-motivated, noting that lower budgets will enable more proposals to be funded.

3. Priority Research Areas

The priority research areas for this RFA are listed in Table 1. **Any applications that are not responsive to these priority areas will not be considered.**

The call focuses on health systems research with a clear pathway to policy uptake, health system strengthening, equitable access to quality healthcare, scalability and measurable impact within the South African public health system. The broad research areas listed in the table must be applied to one or more of: HIV, TB, other infectious diseases, cardiovascular and metabolic diseases, cancer, mental health, and women's, maternal, neonatal and child health. Applications outside of these priority areas are out of scope. Applications must address a clearly defined health system problem and generate evidence relevant to service delivery, policy, financing, governance, workforce, access, equity, or system-level adoption. Studies focused on clinical efficacy, basic science, laboratory discovery, or product development will be considered **out of scope**

Table 1: Health Systems Research Priorities

Research on integrated service delivery models that strengthen coordination across infectious diseases, non-communicable diseases (NCDs), sexual and reproductive health, mental health and/or maternal, newborn and child health programs.
Research on integrated primary healthcare models that improve equitable access to prevention, early detection, diagnosis, treatment and long-term management of priority diseases and/or co-morbidities across the continuum, including digital surveillance, patient tracking, referral, linkage-to-care, treatment monitoring and clinical decision support systems that strengthen continuity of care within and across disease areas.
Research to strengthen key health system building blocks, including governance, health financing, laboratory networks, human resources for health, task-shifting models, surveillance systems, digital health systems, supply chain management, treatment monitoring, health information systems and healthcare provider-patient interactions.

• Research on differentiated, decentralized, patient-centered, community-based and primary healthcare models that improve prevention uptake, case finding, health literacy, stigma reduction, referral, access, retention and continuity of care, especially for key populations.
• Research on health product introduction, especially health system readiness to support the prioritization, evaluation, regulatory readiness, financing, procurement, implementation, adoption, scale-up and post-introduction evaluation of medicines, vaccines, diagnostics, medical devices and digital health technologies within the South African health system.
• Research to strengthen evidence-informed decision-making, to support knowledge translation of research findings into practice, policy implementation and local uptake of innovations through health technology assessment, evidence-to-policy initiatives, regulatory science, and health system decision-making.
• Health-economic evaluation, cost-effectiveness analysis and service-planning research to support resource allocation and reimbursement decisions.

Notes:

- **Transformation:** Demonstrated contribution to local capacity development, transformation and gender equity will be advantageous. Examples include training of early-career researchers; leadership by and/or inclusion of females and/or historically disadvantaged individuals and/or institutions; or focus on products or approaches that address the needs of underserved populations.

4. Eligibility

This RFA is specifically aimed at supporting the core public research ecosystem in South Africa that focuses exclusively or primarily on conducting health research. However, we recognize the critical contribution of other non-profit research institutions with a similar core business and contribution. This is, therefore, an open call for applications from researchers based at South African public universities, public research entities, science councils, national facilities and other recognized research institutions whose primary purpose is research and training of postgraduate students (Masters and PhD).

The following are not eligible to apply in response to this RFA but may be included as collaborators under eligible institutions: Non-governmental and non-profit entities whose primary purpose is not research and training of postgraduate students; private companies; civil society groups; and non-South African entities. Principal Investigators must be South African citizens or permanent residence holders and must be employed by an eligible South African institution capable of administering the grant.

Applications must demonstrate relevance to the priority areas listed in section 3; scientific merit; feasibility; ethical and regulatory readiness; institutional support; and a clear pathway to scientific advancement, public health impact, policy uptake, product development, and/or implementation.

5. Application Process and Timeline

All applications and supporting documents for this RFA must be submitted online using the following link: [SAMRC-RFA-GIPD-04-2026](#). **No applications submitted via email will be accepted.**

All sections of the application must be comprehensively and accurately completed. It is important to include all relevant information and detail that will enable the merit of the application to be evaluated. All applications must be approved by the relevant duly authorized representative of the institution submitting the application through a signed Declaration Form on the proposal template **prior to submission**. Please take note of any institutional deadlines in this regard to ensure that sign-off is obtained by the closing date.

The due date for applications is **16 October 2026, 23:59 (SAST)**. No late, incomplete or unsigned applications will be accepted.

Kindly refer to the [SAMRC's General Terms and Conditions of Funding](#), including allowable and non-allowable costs.

Documents to be uploaded/submitted:

- Completed online application: [SAMRC-RFA-GIPD-04-2026](#)
- CVs of principal investigator and co-investigator(s)
- [Detailed Proposal on SAMRC template](#) (with declaration and designated institutional authority approval signed)
- [Detailed Budget on SAMRC template](#)

The estimated timelines for the application and award process are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Estimated application and award timelines

Process Stage	Due Date
RFA Release Date	12 August 2026
Application Due Date	16 October 2026
Review of Applications	October - December 2026
Notification of Awards	January - March 2027

6. Evaluation of Applications

There will be a two-step review and evaluation process:

1. Internal SAMRC screening for responsiveness to the priority areas and to all the specified administrative and procedural requirements of the RFA.
2. National and/or international peer review to assess the scientific merit (and other review criteria as specified below) of applications found to be eligible and responsive to the RFA.

Internal screening

All submitted applications will be screened by the SAMRC for completeness and responsiveness to the RFA priority areas and administrative requirements/provisions. If the application is found to be incomplete or unresponsive to the provisions described in the RFA, or was submitted after the deadline, the application will not be processed further.

Internal screening will be conducted using the following criteria:

- Was the application received on or before the closing date and time?

- Does the institution/entity and applicant meet all eligibility criteria according to the guidelines?
- Is the application complete, with all sections filled in, and endorsed by the entity's relevant authorized representative?
- Does the application address one or more of the targeted research priority areas?
- Have all the required supporting documents been provided?

Peer Review

Each application that passes the internal screening will be peer reviewed, considering at least the following criteria:

Significance/ Relevance/ Impact - relevance of the proposed research to the RFA topic areas; potential of the research to improve scientific knowledge, technical capability, and/or clinical practice in the field; potential of the research to lead to positive health, economic or societal impacts in South Africa or Africa; likelihood that the research will advance basic biomedical concepts, unmet needs in human health, or contribute to healthcare policy or practice or towards the development of important new products such as vaccine, diagnostics or therapies; whether the application challenges and seeks to shift current research or clinical practice paradigms by utilizing novel theoretical concepts, approaches, methodologies, instrumentation, or interventions; the extent to which the results of the project will contribute to health advancements or to solving barriers to progress in the field.

Approach – level of innovation of the approach; technology risks; whether the overall strategy, methodology, sample size and analyses are well-reasoned and appropriate to accomplish the specific aims of the project; the extent to which the research builds on existing research, data, expertise, cohorts, etc.

Investigator(s) – size and breadth of the team (single institution/PI versus multi-institutional and multi-disciplinary); experience and record of the PI, co-investigator(s), collaborators, and other researchers; complementarity and synergy between the PI and co-investigators and the extent to which the research is enhanced by the collaboration(s); availability of all necessary expertise to complete the work.

Environment – availability of appropriate and necessary infrastructure, support, equipment, and other physical resources; unique features of the scientific environment, subject populations, or collaborative arrangements.

Capacity Development and Collaboration – presence of a clear plan for capacity development; potential of the project to develop the research capacity of early career and/or previously disadvantaged researchers and/or previously disadvantaged and resource-limited institutions; inclusion of post-graduate students.

Overall scoring of applications will be in accordance with the descriptions in Table 3.

Table 3: Scoring Guideline for Applications

Criterion Strength	Description	Score	Descriptor
High	Applications that are exceptionally strong and well-motivated, meet and/or exceed all criteria, are very novel and innovative with high potential for successful development or implementation of a health system solution or advancement of scientific understanding. May have minor or no weaknesses.	10	Exceptional
		9	Outstanding
		8	Excellent

Medium	Applications that are novel and innovative with high potential for successful development or implementation of a health system solution or advancement of scientific understanding, but weaknesses in the other criteria bring down the overall impact to medium. and/or Project is moderately novel and/or innovative with moderate potential for successful development or implementation of a health system solution or advancement of scientific understanding.	7	Very Good
		6	Good
		5	Satisfactory
Low	Applications that are novel and/or innovative with potential for successful development or implementation of a health system solution or advancement of scientific understanding, but weaknesses in the other criteria bring down the overall impact to low. and/or Project is moderately or weakly novel and/or innovative with low potential for successful development or implementation of a health solution or advancement of scientific understanding. and/or Applications that are poorly written and/or have insufficient detail to effectively evaluate their merit	4	Average
		3	Fair
		2	Marginal
		1	Poor

7. Selection of Awardees

The awarding of grants emanating from this RFA will be determined by the SAMRC and relevant steering committee, considering the recommendations from the peer review process. The SAMRC may also consider additional factors, such as institutional diversity and transformation in making its final determinations. Based on the merit of the applications and/or budget limitations, the SAMRC may award fewer or more grants than expected and may elect not to allocate all the available funds to awards from this RFA.

The SAMRC reserves the right to make no awards and re-advertise the RFA if it so wishes or to cancel this RFA altogether. The SAMRC may also phase the awards as required.

8. Additional Important Information

- The SAMRC may seek to verify any information provided by applicants through independent research, or by third parties approved by the SAMRC.
- The SAMRC assumes no responsibility for costs incurred in responding to this RFA or any further invitations or communications.
- The SAMRC reserves the right to amend or withdraw the RFA at any time and/or to make no awards.
- Successful awards may be subject to addressing comments from the peer review and/or Steering Committee and/or negotiation of project plans and budgets.
- 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.
- The SAMRC reserves the right to withhold grant funds 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.

- The SAMRC may use text, video or other visual representation submitted by successful applicants on the SAMRC website or on SAMRC materials for publicity and/or public awareness.

9. POPIA Compliance

As of the 1st of July 2021, the new Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) came into full effect (see <https://popia.co.za/> for full details on the act). The law is designed to protect how all juristic persons use, store and process data. The SAMRC as a responsible statutory science council complies with POPIA.

The SAMRC will receive personal information through the applications submitted to the SAMRC in response to this RFA. The personal information requested on the application template is necessary for the SAMRC to fully evaluate the application for funding. This information will be shared with local and international external reviewers, local and international funders, the relevant steering committee as well as the SAMRC management for the purposes of processing the application. The SAMRC will process this personal information strictly in accordance with POPIA. The SAMRC undertakes specifically to process the personal information on the basis that (a) it was provided voluntarily and (b) the information will be processed only as far as may be necessary and within the limitation and ambit of the purpose of evaluating the application for funding (i.e., the purpose for which the personal information was received). The SAMRC confirms that it is lawfully processing the information since the purpose of processing is to seek quality applications for funding which the SAMRC is mandated to do in terms of Section 4 of the SAMRC Act 58 of 1991, thus the SAMRC is fulfilling its legislated and lawful mandate, and strategic objectives as provided for in the SAMRC Act.

By submitting your application to the SAMRC you acknowledge and agree to the use of your personal information as outlined above. Should you not approve of such use of your personal information then please refrain from submitting an application.

10. Enquiries

Kindly address any queries on this RFA to gipd.rfa@mrc.ac.za.