Innovative Communication Strategies and Approaches for Linking Research Data to Public Health Institutions for Decision Making and Countering Misinformation

Call Announcement Date: 14 July 2023

New submission deadline: 30 August 2023 @ 15h00 SAST (UTC +2:00)

1. BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for accurate and accessible information to support public health decision-making and deployment of appropriate interventions. The effective communication of complex data between public health institutions is an essential and challenging task, particularly where unfamiliar data are involved. Genomic surveillance data, for example, attracted enormous interest during the pandemic, but can require nuanced interpretation. In Africa pathogen genomics capacity increased dramatically, with over 100,000 SARS-CoV-2 genomes sequenced in 2022, and valuable contributions made by African scientists to the identification of globally important variants of concern. While COVID-19 led to innovative approaches in information sharing, visualization, and use, these learnings are yet to be fully applied to other priority pathogens such as cholera, HIV, and TB. **There is a need for the creation of data-driven strategies, tools, and systems that can be integrated with African public health systems for deployment during outbreaks, epidemics, and pandemics to inform public health decision-making.**

Historically, public health data and statistics have not been widely available to the general public. The COVID-19 pandemic saw unprecedented public access to, and interest in, these types of data. Clear public messaging has the potential to increase understanding of the rationale for and impact of interventions and to increase population cooperation. However, information fatigue combined with misinformation disseminated via social media platforms have the potential to impact mental health, health seeking behavior, and perceptions of populations towards public health institutes and routine public health services. **Thus, there is a need for appropriate strategies and tools for proper public communication to maximize benefit and minimize the impact of misinformation**. **Through this RFP we seek to make all surveillance (including genomic surveillance) information collected by public health and research institutions available to policymakers in an understandable and actionable manner that dispels misinformation.**

2. THE CHALLENGE

Through this RFP, we intend to identify and support a portfolio of projects aimed at i) Developing and implementing approaches that innovatively use data to inform policymakers about critical issues,

particularly regarding outbreaks and epidemics as well as regression of progress made in other disease areas over the past two/three years due to COVID-19; and ii) Developing and implementing public health communication strategies that empower the general public to be less susceptible to misinformation and instead appropriately respond to public health threats.

The funding opportunity is open to applicants in Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, and Uganda.

3. WHAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR

This RFP includes 2 funding opportunities:

3.1 Funding for creative, sustainable approaches for dissemination of genomic surveillance data at the national level

The goal for this scope of work is to identify and support effective national communication strategies related to genomic surveillance in specific geographies in Africa. Priority will be given to innovative approaches or tools that i) efficiently deliver research information to relevant public health institutions for dissemination and decision making, ii) inform communications for locally relevant pathogens/diseases, iii) measure how the communications successfully shift sentiments, knowledge, or perspectives in a defined population, and iv) recommend how the above can be used across other pathogens, diseases, and/or geographies. Priority will be given to improved data communication tools that support automated report generation from complex data, thus reducing the need for skilled data analysts. **Proposals related to cholera will be prioritized for this funding opportunity.**

3.2 Funding for the development of data analytics and visualization tools

The goal for this scope of work is to identify and support data communication tools and strategies to effectively disseminate accurate and timely information related to globally and locally relevant diseases (in particular cholera, TB, HIV, polio, malaria, and ebola) to policy makers and the public. Solutions that enable understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on these diseases using trends analysis, illustrations, etc., of historical and recent data are specially encouraged. This could include revamping existing or developing new data analytics and visualization platforms. The output is expected to be, for example, a user-friendly public-facing tool. The tool is encouraged to be easily

understandable, visually appealing, and interactive such that it will enable access to accurate public health information thereby empowering various sectors of the population to view and utilize the information for various purposes, including decision-making by policymakers.

PRIORITY WILL BE GIVEN TO:

- applicants who demonstrate clear links to their national reference laboratories and public health institutes,
- applications which demonstrate the potential to be applicable to more than one disease area and/or geography, and
- applications which demonstrate clear strategies to track utility and sustainability beyond the grant period.

4. WHAT WE ARE NOT LOOKING FOR:

- Applications originating and/or to be implemented outside the priority countries listed,
- Applications without a clear link to relevant national reference laboratories and public health institutes,
- Proposals that seek to deploy information via existing platforms without a clear potential improvement on the status quo.
- Proposals for interventions that are not directly relevant to low- and middle-income contexts.

5. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

This call for proposals is open to applicants based at universities or institutions, science councils and other public research organizations, and non-profit organizations located in the following countries: **Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, and Uganda.**

Principal Investigators should be African citizens or have permanent residency in the African countries listed.

For-profit organizations are **not** eligible to apply but may be included as collaborators or sub-contractors if they provide a service, technology or capability that is not available among the eligible project partners.

While there is no limit to the number of applications submitted per organization, **principal investigators may only submit one application each as the principal investigator** but may be involved in more than one application if listed as a co-investigator.

Recipients may be subject to due diligence prior to the award of funds.

6. FUNDING LEVEL

This request for proposals will provide grants of up to R 1,613,500 (USD $100,000) for a period of up to 12 months.

7. APPLICATION PROCESS

It is critical that applicants follow the instructions in this RFA.

7.1 Application

Applicants must complete the online application form using the following link: https://redcap.link/publichealthinformation

Applications will not be processed further or considered for funding if they:

- Are deemed non-responsive to the specific topics included in this RFA.
- Are received after the deadline for submission.
- Are incomplete, i.e., do not complete all sections of the proposal and budget templates and all requested supporting documents attached.
- Are from non-eligible organizations and countries.

Budget Guidelines

- Budgets submitted must include all applicable taxes**.**
- South African applicants must prepare budgets in South African Rands (ZAR).
- Applicants from other eligible countries may prepare their budgets in South African Rand or USD, noting that the exchange rate for awards will be based on the USD/ZAR rate at which the SAMRC received the funds.
- All direct line items must be auditable.
- ***Allowable costs***
    - Personnel: Soft-funded posts for individuals working on the project (e.g., post-docs, students, technicians, project managers) will be funded, provided an accurate

estimation of time allocation is provided, and they are not already funded from other means.
    - Consultants: These may include local and/or foreign consultants who provide a service or capability not available among the project partners but essential for the completion of project deliverables.
    - Equipment: Partial or full support for the cost of equipment may be requested, provided that it is directly required for the project. A budget limitation may apply.
    - Supplies, consumables and other direct laboratory or research costs.
    - Sub-contracts: These may be to any local or international organization that provides a service or capability that is not available among the project partners but is essential for the completion of project deliverables.
    - Travel and accommodation directly related to the project's execution.
    - Institutional overhead: An indirect costs rate of 5% is allowed.
- **Non-Allowable Costs**
    - Salaries of permanent or fixed-term staff, e.g., tenured staff, professors etc., that are fully covered by the host institutions.
    - Purchase or construction of a building.
    - Rental costs for space that is owned by the institutions participating in the project.
    - Recruitment or retrenchment costs for staff.
    - Purchase of office furniture.

Supporting Documentation required:

- Institutional Approval
- Full Budget
- Curriculum Vitae for the Investigators

7.2 Review and Evaluation of Proposals

Eligibility Screening

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

Evaluation

All eligible applications will be reviewed by local and international experts, considering at least the following criteria:

- **Significance/ Relevance/ Impact:** potential impact of the expected results on current and/or future public health communication approaches.
- **Approach:** level of innovation of the approach; rationality of the proposed work plan, cost-effectiveness of the project.
- **Team:** size and reach of the team (single institution/principal investigator versus multi-institutional and multi-disciplinary); experience and record of the investigators, collaborators, and other researchers, complementarity of the project partners.
- **Environment:** availability of appropriate and necessary infrastructure, support, equipment, and other physical resources; unique features of the project environment, subject populations, or collaborative arrangements.

8. TIMELINE

The timelines for the application process are as follows:

RFP Release Date	14 July 2023
Extended Application Due Date	30 August 2023 @ 15h00 SAST (UTC +2:00)
Peer Review of Applications	September – mid-October 2023
Internal Approvals	October – mid-November 2023
Notification of Awards	November 2023

9. IMPORTANT ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- The funders may seek to verify any information provided by applicants through independent research or by third parties approved.
- The funders assume no responsibility for costs incurred in responding to this RFA or any further invitations or communications.
- The funders reserve the right to amend or withdraw from the RFA at any time.
- Successful awards may be subject to addressing reviewer comments and/or negotiation of project plans, number of investigators and budgets.

- Grants will be paid to the institution where the principal investigator is employed, as set out in a funding agreement to be concluded between the parties.
- No grant funds will be provided for the research 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, The funders reserve the right to withdraw the award.
- The funders may use text, video or other visual representation submitted by successful applicants on the respective website or on materials for publicity and/or public awareness.

Please follow this link for more information on the RFP and to download all the relevant documents: https://www.samrc.ac.za/funding/innovative-communication-strategies-and-approaches-linking-research-data-public-health

All applications and supporting documents must be submitted through the SAMRC Application Portal:

- SAMRC Application Portal: https://redcap.link/publichealthinformation

Please direct any queries or requests for information on this RFA to **Karabo Kgomo: (Karabo.Kgomo@mrc.ac.za)**