

## **Mpox Research in South Africa**

### **Request for Applications (RFA)**

**SAMRC-RFA-GIPD-07-2024**

**Release Date: 11 September 2024**

**Extended closing date: 31 October 2024**

## 1. Introduction and background

The mission of the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) is to improve the nation's health and quality of life by conducting and funding relevant and responsive health research, development, innovation, and research translation. The SAMRC is the largest local funder of health research in Southern Africa and supports high quality research, innovation, and capacity development through a variety of grant programmes and strategic partnerships.

The SAMRC is partnering with the Department of Science and Innovation through the Strategic Health Innovation Partnerships (SHIP) programme to support research on Mpox in South Africa.

Mpox is caused by the species monkeypox virus (MPXV), genus Orthopoxvirus, discovered in 1958 in a primate research facility in Denmark, with the first human case reported in 1970. Mpox virus infection is caused normally by spill-over events to humans from animals. The virus can also be transmitted from one person to another by close contact with lesions, body fluids, respiratory droplets and contaminated materials.

Since January 2023, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has reported more than 22,000 suspect mpox cases and more than 1,200 deaths. The Republic of the Congo (ROC), which borders DRC to the west, declared a clade I mpox outbreak in April 2024. On 13 August 2024, Africa CDC Director General, Dr Jean Kaseya, declared mpox a public health emergency of continental security, saying there was an urgent need for swift and decisive action by the global community to eliminate the threat of the disease. Following this, on 14 August 2024, WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has determined that the upsurge of mpox in the DRC and a growing number of countries in Africa constitutes a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) under the International Health Regulations.

In South Africa there have been 24 confirmed mpox cases since 8 May 2024, with many cases associated with advanced HIV disease, which explains the high rates of severe disease and hospitalisations, with three deaths reported to date. The National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) has reported that sequencing has confirmed Clade IIb in at least the first 5 cases. At this point, the South African outbreak does not appear to have a direct link to what is happening in the DRC.

In response to the recent announcements, the SAMRC and DSI are redirecting funding to support an mpox research and innovation programme directly aimed at better understanding, preparing for and addressing mpox in South Africa and beyond.

## 2. Funding opportunity description

This RFA seeks to support research proposals focused on mpox in the areas listed in Table 1:

**Table 1: Areas of research for mpox**

No:	Research area	Details
1.	Surveillance	Understanding the prevalence of mpox in South Africa and the circulating strains/clades
2.	Immunology	Understanding immune responses to mpox in the South African population, including in the context of other infections and multi-morbidities and impact on disease outcomes
3.	Diagnostics	Development of relevant diagnostic tools for the detection of mpox infections
4.	Mpox and HIV	Comparison of phenotypic expression in HIV infected vs. HIV uninfected individuals and impact on disease outcomes
5.	Vaccines	Studies on candidate vaccines for mpox
6.	Therapeutics	Studies on new / repurposed therapeutic agents for treating mpox

This RFA is seeking to fund collaborative projects between institutions in the target research areas rather than small, siloed projects. Investigators are therefore encouraged to collaborate to develop a single holistic response in each of the research areas. Research to be supported through this RFA may include translational research, laboratory-based research, or hypothesis-driven and hypothesis-generating clinical research, with the objective of improving scientific understanding of the disease in our population and identifying tools for diagnosis, prevention and treatment. Project duration should preferably be between 12-18 months and may not exceed 24 months.

## 3. Eligibility

This is an open call for applications from researchers based at South African Public Universities and South African Public Research Entities, namely Science Councils, National Facilities, and other recognized research institutions. PIs must be South African citizens or permanent residence holders.

While there is no limit to the number of applications submitted per organisation, 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.

## 4. Application Process and Timeline

***The SAMRC reserves the right to make no awards and re-advertise a Request for Applications if it so wishes or to cancel this RFA altogether.***

All applications and supporting documents for this RFA must be submitted online using the following link: [https://redcap.link/samrc\\_mpx](https://redcap.link/samrc_mpx) The due date for applications is **extended to 31 October 2024, 23:59 (SAST)**.

No late or incomplete applications will be accepted.

Any queries in relation to this RFA may be emailed to [gipd.mpox@mrc.ac.za](mailto:gipd.mpox@mrc.ac.za).

All applications must be approved by the relevant duly authorized representative of the institution submitting the application through a signed Declaration uploaded on the system.

Applications must be submitted using the online form with supporting documents to be uploaded on the system. No applications submitted via email only 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 merits of the application to be evaluated.

For more information on the SAMRC's General Terms and Conditions of Funding, including allowable and non-allowable costs, please go to [Funding at the SAMRC | SAMRC](#).

Supporting documents to be downloaded/submitted:

- Online application: [https://redcap.link/samrc\\_mpox](https://redcap.link/samrc_mpox)
- CVs of principal investigator and co-investigator
- [Detailed budget template](#)
- [Declaration and institutional approval](#)

The 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	11 September 2024
<b>Extended application Due Date</b>	<b>31 October 2024</b>
Review of Applications	November 2024
Approvals	November 2024
Notification of Awards	November/December 2024

## 5. Evaluation of Applications

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

1. Internal SAMRC screening for responsiveness to all the specified administrative and procedural provisions required in 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 responsive to the RFA.

### Internal screening

All applications will be screened by the SAMRC for completeness and responsiveness to the RFA and its 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 done using the following criteria:

- Was the application received on or before the closing date?
- Do the 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 in a signed letter?
- Have all required supporting documents been provided?
- Does the application address one or more of the targeted mpox research areas?

### Peer Review

Each application that passes the internal screening will be peer reviewed, taking into account 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 utilising 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, 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 reach 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; 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, black and women researchers and/or resource-limited institutions; complementarity and synergy between the PI and co-investigators and the extent to which the research is enhanced by the collaboration(s).

Applications will be scored according to the guide in Table 3.

**Table 3: Scoring Guide for Applications.**

Criterion Strength		Score	Descriptor
High	Applications that are exceptionally strong and well-motivated, meet and/or exceed all criteria, are very innovative with high potential for successful development of a health solution or advancement of scientific understanding. May have minor or	10	Exceptional
		9	Outstanding

	no weaknesses.	8	Excellent
Medium	Applications that are innovative with high potential for successful development of a health solution or advancement of scientific understanding, but weaknesses in the other criteria bring down the overall impact to medium. and/or Project is moderately innovative with moderate potential for successful development of a health solution or advancement of scientific understanding.	7	Very Good
		6	Good
		5	Satisfactory
Low	Applications that are innovative with potential for successful development of a health 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 innovative with low potential for successful development of a health solution or advancement of scientific understanding.	4	Average
		3	Fair
		2	Marginal
		1	Poor

## 8. Selection of Awardees

The awarding of grants emanating from this RFA will be determined by the SAMRC and relevant steering committee, taking into account 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 a Request for Applications if it so wishes or to cancel this RFA altogether. SAMRC may also phase the awarding as required.***

## 9. 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 reviewer comments and/or negotiation of project plans and budget.
- Grants will be paid to the institution/organisation 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.

## 10. POPIA Compliance

As of the 1st of July 2021, the new Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) came into full effect. The law is designed to protect how all juristic persons use, store and process data. You can read the full details on the act here: <https://popia.co.za/>. 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 external reviewers, 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 may be necessary and within the limitation and ambit of the purpose of evaluating the application for funding (i.e., the purpose with 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.**

## 11. Enquiries

Kindly address any enquiries to [gipd.mpox@mrc.ac.za](mailto:gipd.mpox@mrc.ac.za).