Request for Applications (RFA)

HIV Research and Innovation

MRC-RFA-SHIP-03-2025

Release Date: 06 March 2025

Closing Date: 30 April 2025, 16h00 SAST

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 Strategic Health Innovation Partnerships program (SHIP) is a partnership between the SAMRC and the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI), whose goal is to support the development of new or improved vaccines, therapeutics, medical devices, diagnostics and services in key health priority areas.

HIV remains a significant global health challenge. According to UNAIDS/WHO estimates, globally in 2023 there were still approximately 39.9 million people living with HIV, 1.3 million people acquired HIV and 630,000 people died from HIV-related causes. These figures are all improvements over previous periods; however, the world is clearly not on top of this epidemic as yet. While we recognize the significant strides made to date in diagnosing and large-scale treatment of HIV and the available tools for prevention, an efficacious vaccine, additional therapeutic options and optimal implementation of existing tools remain elusive.

In South Africa, according to the Sixth South African National HIV Prevalence, Incidence, and Behaviour survey released by the HSRC, the percentage of all people living with HIV has decreased from 14.0% in 2017 to 12.7**%** in 2022. This translates to approximately 7.8 million people living with HIV in South Africa in 2022 (though other reports estimate this at 8.45 million). Factors contributing to this decrease include fewer people getting infected with HIV, more children born HIV-negative, AIDS-related mortality, and people aging and dying from natural causes. The 2022 survey shows that South Africa has made significant progress toward the UNAIDS 95-95-95 targets - among people aged 15 years and older living with HIV in South Africa in 2022, 90% were aware of their status, 91% of those aware of their status were on ART, and 94% of those on ART were virally suppressed. This is an improvement compared to 2017 when the UNAIDS target was 90-90-90 but South Africa achieved 85%-71%-87%. However, we still need to move these closer to 100% and prevent the approximately 150,000 new infections each year.

Notwithstanding the successful roll-out of ART globally, it is not without challenges. These include lack of retention in care, poor adherence due to side effects, as well as the emergence of drug resistance. A sustainable solution to fight the epidemic requires alternatives to lifelong ARV treatment as well as enhanced prevention tools and strategies, supported by effective diagnostic solutions tailored to the unique needs of the South African context. Additionally, there is a need to intensify focus on the development of options for children and pregnant mothers.

This call is aimed at harnessing the core scientific strengths and infrastructure of South Africa and partners to advance the development of improved HIV prevention, testing, and therapeutic options in the country. Local manufacturing of interventions needs to be a key consideration to reduce the reliance on imports.

2. Funding opportunity description

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

Table 1: Targeted areas of research, development and innovation

No:	Research area	Details
1.	HIV Cure and Treatment	Development of novel tools to target the HIV reservoir towards HIV cure Therapeutic vaccines (T and B cell vaccines) Tools that exploit host genetics to advance HIV cure strategies and develop targeted treatment strategies Broadly neutralizing antibodies and other biologics for HIV treatment Co-funding for innovative trial designs (e.g. leveraging AI) to support roll-out of new drugs (e.g. injectables) and existing drugs to new populations (e.g. pregnant women, neonates, paediatric population) Innovative tools to improve patient retention in treatment (e.g. digital adherence tools) Research to optimize treatment of co-morbidities (e.g. cervical and breast cancers and TB in HIV+ women). This may include small clinical trials to optimize dosing regimens. Repurposing of existing drugs and development of technologies to fast-track drug development to Phase 1
2.	Diagnosis	Biomarkers to support the development of ultra-sensitive diagnostic tests to detect new HIV infections (where viral loads are still very low) at the point-of-care Innovative tools to shorten time to detect and respond to drug resistance Tools to monitor treatment adherence Validation of new HIV-related diagnostics in the SA context Improvement of sample collection, analysis and workflows to support timely, accurate diagnosis Localization of manufacturing of affordable tests
3.	Prevention	Tools and strategies to improve uptake of and adherence to PrEP (e.g. optimize delivery systems) Combination prevention strategies, including integration of STI management, and tailored prevention strategies for specific populations, informed by data-driven understanding of transmission networks Advancing the development of broadly neutralizing antibodies for prevention Novel HIV immunogens, vaccine vectors and delivery systems
4.	Other	Preclinical models to support local testing of HIV tools Innovative technologies to accelerate and reduce the costs of developing products into clinical validation

This RFA is seeking to fund collaborative projects between institutions in the target research areas rather than small, siloed projects. Wherever possible, investigators are therefore encouraged to collaborate to develop a single holistic response in each of the research areas. It is important to note that SHIP will prioritize

projects with a clear product development focus. Projects will be supported for a duration of **2 years.**

3. Available Funding

The total amount available for this RFA is approximately R 60,000,000, with successful proposals to be awarded for a maximum duration of 2 years. The number of projects selected and the award value will depend on the number of qualifying proposals received and budget justifications. Where feasible and based on merit, the SAMRC and the DSTI will endeavour to support projects addressing each of the broad research areas outlined above.

4. 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. Principal Investigators must be South African citizens or permanent residence holders.

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

5. Application Process and Timeline

All applications and supporting documents for this RFA must be submitted online using the following link: HIV Research and Innovation Request For Applications (RFA). **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 merits 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 uploaded on the system. The due date for applications is **30 April 2025 (16h00, SAST)**.

No late or incomplete applications will be accepted.

Any queries in relation to this RFA may be emailed to ship.rfps@mrc.ac.za

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.

All applications must be competed through the online SAMRC Application Portal. To complete your application and submit the required documents, please access the application portal via the following link: HIV Research and Innovation Request For Applications (RFA)

(***Please click on the highlighted documents below to download templates***)

- Proposal
- Full Budget
- Curriculum Vitae for the Investigators

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	06 March 2025
Application Due Date	30 April 2025, 16h00 SAST
Review of Applications	May-July 2025
Approvals	August/September 2025
Notification of Awards	September/October 2025

6. Evaluation of Applications

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

1. Internal SAMRC screening for eligibility, responsiveness to the RFA topics and adherence to all the specified administrative and procedural provisions required in the RFA.
2. Independent 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 conducted using the following criteria:

- Was the application received on or before the closing date and time?
- 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 HIV research areas listed in Table 1?

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 vaccines, 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. May have minor or no weaknesses.	10	Exceptional
		9	Outstanding
		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 SHIP 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 at its own discretion 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 (including international 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. The SAMRC reserves the right to make publicly available the name and institution of the principal investigator(s), project title and award amount for successful applications.

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 ship.rfps@mrc.ac.za.