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## **Management Response to the Mid-Term Review of the South Africa-Norway Research Cooperation on Blue Economy, Climate Change, the Environment and Sustainable Energy (SANOCEAN)**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The National Research Foundation (NRF) has a long-term science and technology partnership with Norway, predominantly through joint funding of collaborative research projects between South African and Norwegian researchers. This bilateral partnership is aimed at building scientific and technological research capacity within the areas of Blue Economy, Climate Change, the Environment and Sustainable Energy. When the partnership started in 2002 it was popularly known as the joint SA/Norway research programme focusing on climate change, environment and sustainable energy (SANCOOP). The partnership has since evolved and expanded and it is currently known as the *South Africa-Norway cooperation on ocean research including blue economy, climate change, the environment and sustainable energy* (SANOCEAN). One of the main objectives of this bilateral programme is to strengthen, in a sustainable way, quality research and capacity building in the partner countries, both at institutional and individual levels. Special emphasis is put on ensuring the participation of Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs), researchers from historically disadvantaged backgrounds as well as postgraduate students.

In early 2017, towards the end of SANCOOP Phase III, both the NRF and the Research Council Norway (RCN) appointed Mr Arvid Hallén, former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of RCN, and the late Dr Gerhard Gruenewald (former Deputy CEO of the NRF) to undertake a comprehensive evaluation of SANCOOP. The aim of this evaluation was to assess Phase III of SANCOOP to inform a potential follow-up Programme for the period 2018-2023. The positive outcomes of this evaluation led to the decision, by the two governments, to continue SANCOOP beyond Phase III. This agreement was reached in June 2017 where it was also agreed that the new Programme should be expanded to include the blue economy as one of the collaborative themes. The new Programme was formerly announced in December 2017 as “SANOCEAN” (and no longer SANCOOP). The Norwegian government committed NOK30 million and South Africa committed R15 million for SANOCEAN. Ten joint projects were approved for funding under the SANOCEAN Programme.

In line with the Framework Document between the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the South African Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) signed on 9 February 2018, as well the NRF Grant Agreement with the MFA signed on 12 November 2019, the NRF is expected to lead the mid-term review of SANOCEAN. This directive is provided for in [Clause 13.6.5](#) of the SANOCEAN Framework

Document and Clause 13.1 of the SANOCEAN Grant Agreement.

The SANOCEAN Programme is due to end in 2023 with a comprehensive Programme evaluation. The purpose of the mid-term review therefore was to provide an overview of progress to date, achievements, challenges, and possible recommendations to better implement the SANOCEAN Programme in the remaining period of funding. The review covered the period: 1 December 2017 to 31 March 2021. What follows below is the NRF management response to the review report as received. Not all the panel findings are discussed in this management response. The response is limited only to those aspects of the review findings that require NRF action and/or response.

## COMMENTS ON THE REVIEW OUTCOMES

A panel of four members was appointed for this task and was requested to confine the scope of the review to the following three factors:

1. Governance and management;
2. Review of the ten funded joint projects; and
3. Provide recommendations.

### Review Dimension 1: Governance and Management

The review panel was required to determine whether the SANOCEAN programme was in line with the priorities of the partners, assess whether the programme was being implemented according to all the relevant agreement, examine if the programme was on track in achieving its expected results, assess the strengths and weaknesses of the original programme design, assess whether the already implemented activities were contributing to the overall objectives of the programme, assess whether or not there would be a need for programme adjustment, and assess the cost efficiency of the programme. Below is the NRF management response to the findings of the panel in terms of this review dimension.

#### 1. Partner priorities and programme goals

##### Panel Findings

- *Reported mid-term results indicate that the overall goal of producing enhanced knowledge will be achieved, and that the activities are well aligned with national priorities in both countries as well as with the SDGs. Social impact is adequately documented by public talks, TV appearances, and radio broadcasts. The secondary goal of producing entrepreneurs and facilitating general business development, however, has clearly received less attention than stipulated by the funding partners. Also, despite being emphasized in both the SANCOOP Review Report and in the SANOCEAN Framework Document, the involvement of HDIs in South Africa is significantly less than expected.*

##### NRF Management Response

- The Programme's failure to adequately produce entrepreneurs is noted. The NRF will engage with the DSI and the Technology Innovation Agency (TIA) of South Africa to investigate the different mechanisms that could be utilised to address this issue in the renewed Programme. In 2019 the NRF developed its Industry Partnership Strategy which creates an enabling environment for the organisation to advance joint funding with industry partners for

collaborative research and innovation projects with clear impact pathways aimed at increasing research, innovation and commercialisation impact on society. Further to this, the NRF is currently negotiating an agreement with TIA to jointly develop a partnership framework aligned with the core mandate of the two organisations, with the intent to increase uptake of research in the innovation value chain. These new academia-industry partnership modalities could be considered during the development of the renewed version of SANOCCEAN in order to address the challenge of support for entrepreneurship.

## **2. The role of the Joint Committee (JC)**

### Panel Findings

- *We believe the JC has fulfilled its role in accordance with the Framework Document. Going forward, we hope the JC will take an active role in securing funding for a “Phase V” of the bilateral research programme between South Africa and Norway.*

### NRF Management Response

- The NRF notes this finding and avails itself to continue providing support for SANOCCEAN beyond the current Phase.

## **3. The role of the Secretariat**

### Panel Findings

- *We believe the Secretariat would have benefitted from more explicit description of operational responsibilities between NRF and RCN (including the distinction in responsibilities), as well as a stronger adherence to the timeline in the Framework Document.*

### NRF Management Response

- The NRF will work closely with the RCN in revising the cooperative arrangements, implementation procedures and the obligations of the two entities for the renewed version of SANOCCEAN. The timelines in the Framework Document were not developed with COVID-19 in mind. The delays that were experienced were mostly due to COVID-19 related challenges.

## **4. Incompatible funding and reporting structures**

### Panel Findings

- *We believe decisions and actions taken by the JC and the Secretariat were appropriate, although it is tempting to suggest that such administrative incompatibilities should have been identified and resolved at an earlier stage of the programme. We support NRF’s suggestion that in future research programmes top-up funds from MFA should consider disbursing funds in South Africa, not via NRF, but either directly to the South African institutions or via their Norwegian partner.*

### NRF Management Response

- Although SANOCCEAN is a joint Programme, there will always be nuanced differences in the granting systems of the two implementing agencies. However, there are administrative incompatibilities that can/ and should be analysed and reconsidered when negotiating partnership terms under the renewal phase.

## 5. Student bursaries in South Africa

### Panel Findings

- *We agree with the JC affirmation on the flexibility that needs to be implemented in terms of student support, but there is little to no information on how the NRF has progressed in this area.*

### NRF Management Response

- The NRF will engage the DSI and together formulate a mechanism of ensuring earmarked funds for capacity development.

## 6. Delays due to COVID-19

### Panel Findings

- *We believe decisions and actions taken by the JC and the Secretariat were appropriate, timely, and adequate – in particular, the decision to give projects six months no cost extensions without compromising the end-date for SANOCCEAN.*

### NRF Management Response

- The NRF notes this finding and can confirm that the six months extension of projects has been implemented for all projects.

## Review Dimension 2: Review of the Ten Funded Joint Projects

For this second review dimension the review panel was required to determine the impact of COVID-19 on the funded projects, projects' mitigation plans at mid-term (and the likelihood of projects achieving their intended objectives), equity and redress (for instance promoting young and emerging researchers, historically disadvantaged groups and institutions and transformation in terms of race and gender). Below is the NRF management response to the findings of the panel in terms of this review dimension.

### 1. Progress towards technical deliverables

### Panel Findings

- *Projects were frequently challenged on the resignation of a PI (in one case) and/or postgraduate students or postdoctoral fellows.*

### NRF Management Response

- The NRF acknowledges this finding and indeed, there were two projects in particular that experienced extended delays due to resignations of South African PIs. Although there are clear processes and procedures set by the NRF for such instances, as detailed in the Conditions of Grant (CoG) contracts signed by the NRF and funded researchers, unfortunately some of the researchers/ institutions do not always adhere to the terms of these contracts. In some instances, the NRF is informed quite late about some of the changes in funded projects. The NRF is in a process of implementing its new granting system (NRF Connect System). This new system takes into consideration these types of gaps and going forward there shouldn't be these elongated processes of replacing PIs and/or students.

### Panel Findings

- *COVID-19 posed a clear challenge to all projects, causing significant delays in some – although not all. The projects that were better able to weather the impacts of COVID-19 were, in part, those that were able to start earlier, thus undertaking some activities before the start of the pandemic. At least one of such projects had co-funding which likely expedited this process.*

### NRF Management Response

- It is commendable to witness the different achievements reported by the PIs despite the two-year disruption as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak.

### Panel Findings

- *Most projects indicated that they would like better communication between themselves and NRF and RCN going forward (using a range of channels).*

### NRF Management Response

- The NRF and RCN had planned to convene regular workshops with the funded researchers (kick-off, mid-term and closing) and undertake visits to funded projects. Unfortunately, the mid-term workshop and the visits to funded projects could not be organised due to COVID-19. However, the two agencies are still planning to host the closing workshop in 2023. These workshops and visits serve as additional forms of communication between funders and researchers. Other possible forms of communication will be explored when conceptualising the renewal of SANOCEAN. It is believed that the new NRF granting system (NRF Connect), once fully functional, will also address this challenge through its grants monitoring functionality.

## **2. Progress towards HCD deliverables**

### Panel Findings

- *We would strongly recommend that funding for South African postgraduate students be ring-fenced going forward. The model of South African postgraduate students on projects applying for the open NRF competitive pool of funding was a common and significant challenge for all projects.*

### NRF Management Response

- This finding is noted and has been responded to on the previous page (page 4).

### Panel Findings

- *There is a strong bias towards the strongest institutions, with all South African PIs from the highest-ranked universities such as Cape Town, Stellenbosch, Western Cape and Northwest (Potchefstroom Campus). We would strongly recommend more proactive measurements to inform a broader group of institutions (HDIs) of the upcoming opportunities to encourage them to participate as a lead institution, and to have strong partnership with the highest-ranked institutions. Despite being explicitly emphasized that one of the SANOCEAN objectives is to engage black, female and young researchers, the demographics were not very well balanced, and the projects PIs are dominated by white male researchers. However, female students in both countries are well represented.*

### NRF Management Response

- Participation of the HDIs is strongly encouraged in the programme, however, the response has not always been satisfactory. This has been a great concern for the funders and mechanisms will be explored in the renewed programme to support the participation of the HDIs in the programme. It is encouraging that the University of the Western Cape, a former HDI, served as a lead in one of the projects. Further to this, there were three projects that managed to co-opt the following HDIs as research partners: University of the Western Cape, University of Fort Hare and University of Zululand.

### **Comments on the panel recommendations**

Lastly, the panel was requested to provide recommendations by highlighting achievements and shortcomings, identifying areas for improvement/enhancement, and by developing recommendations on how best to implement the Programme. Below is the NRF management response to the panel recommendations.

#### Panel Recommendation 1

- *We support JC's decision to give all projects six months no-cost extensions without compromising the end-date for SANOCEAN in 2023.*

NRF Management Response

- The NRF notes this recommendation which has also been fully addressed on page 4.

#### Panel Recommendation 2

- *We encourage researchers in South Africa to consider increasing the involvement of HDIs.*

NRF Management Response

- The NRF notes this recommendation and will build this partnership model into the renewal phase of SANOCEAN.

#### Panel Recommendation 3

- *We encourage PIs in both countries to consider how benefits to society can be demonstrated and to what extent innovations and income generation have resulted from their projects.*

NRF Management Response

- The NRF notes this recommendation and will build this partnership model into the renewal phase of SANOCEAN.

#### Panel Recommendation 4

- *We recommend a Concluding Conference be convened in 2023, in accordance with the Framework Document.*

NRF Management Response

- This recommendation is noted and has been responded to on page 5.

#### Panel Recommendation 5

- *We encourage the JC to take an active role in securing funding for a future "Phase V" of the bilateral research programme between South Africa and Norway.*

NRF Management Response

- The NRF notes this recommendation which has been addressed on page 3.

#### Panel Recommendation 6

- *We support NRF's suggestion that in future research programmes MFA should consider disbursing top-up funds in South Africa, not via NRF, but either directly to the South African institutions or indirectly via their Norwegian partners.*

#### NRF Management Response

- The NRF notes this recommendation. However caution is expressed with respect to a holistic approach to project funding.

#### Panel Recommendation 7

- *We strongly encourage reconsideration of the modality for the funding of South African postgraduates. Funding for postgraduate students in South Africa should be ring-fenced as part of the project, and not left to the separate competitive NRF bursary process.*

#### NRF Management Response

- This recommendation is noted and has been responded to on page 4.

#### Panel Recommendation 8

- *We encourage the requirement for all funding-receiving institutions to indicate their plan Bs for the resignation of PIs, key staff members, postdocs and postgraduate students.*

#### NRF Management Response

- The NRF notes this recommendation which has been addressed on page 4.



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**Date: 26 August 2022**