Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

science, technology & innovation
Department:
Science, Technology and Innovation
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

NRF National Research Foundation

ITALY – SOUTH AFRICA
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COOPERATION
CALL FOR JOINT RESEARCH PROPOSALS FOR THE YEARS 2027-2029
"ISARP – Italy-South Africa Joint Research Programme"

CLOSING DATE: **03 December 2026 for applications**

BACKGROUND

Within the framework of the Scientific and Technological Cooperation Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Italy and the Government of the Republic of South Africa, signed in Pretoria on 15 January 1998 and entered into force on 19 February 2000, the Directorate General for Growth and Export Promotion (DGCE), Office XI, Bilateral Scientific Cooperation, of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI), and the South African Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) and the National Research Foundation (NRF), hereinafter referred to as the "Parties", are opening a call for proposals for a new Executive Programme of Scientific and Technological Cooperation for the years 2027-2029, known as "ISARP – Italy-South Africa Joint Research Programme".

The cost of a project is approximately 60-65 K€/year, including co-funding by the applying institution for Italy.
The maximum budget of a project is R1,5 million Rands (R500 000/year), including funding for HDI institution for South Africa.

Considering the strategic importance of bilateral collaboration between Italy and South Africa, the Italian Ministry of Health could finance projects presented by IRCCS institutions, if selected according to the procedure indicated in this call.

GENERAL INFORMATION

1. Funding Schemes

1.2 With regard to the present call, the available funding scheme is "**Joint Research Projects**". This funding scheme is aimed at supporting bilateral joint research activities co-funded by both Parties. Further details on each funding scheme, including priority research areas, are given below.

1.2 Eligibility Requirements
Project proposals:

- must be written in English;
- must be submitted under one of the priority research areas indicated in point 2 below;
- must have the same duration as the Executive Programme (EP), namely 3 years, 2027-2029.

Each Principal Investigator (P.I.) can submit only one proposal, under penalty of exclusion.

Italian Party:

- the call is open to public or private non-profit research institutions;

- the PI must have Italian or other EU nationality, legal residence in Italy, and must work in a public or private non-profit Italian research institution with either a permanent position or a temporary position covering at least the entire duration of the proposed project. OPPURE the first year of activity of the proposed project (the termination date of the contract shall be declared in the CV).
- The budget amount requested to MAECI for each of the three years must be approximately the same (approximately 33% per year). If a project is selected for financial contribution, the original budget proposal will be valid throughout the duration of the EP. Minor adjustments are permitted upon approval.
- All proposals and funded projects shall comply with the applicable national laws and regulations concerning intellectual property and, where applicable, research security.

South African Party:

The call is open to researchers affiliated with South African universities, public research institutions, or recognized science councils.
The South African Principal Investigator (PI) must:

- be employed on a full-time basis by an eligible South African institution for the entire duration of the proposed project;
- be in good standing with the National Research Foundation (NRF) and meet the institutional eligibility criteria for research leadership roles, for example Principal Investigator or Project Leader;
- submit the proposal through the relevant channels established by the NRF or DSTI for the management of international cooperation projects;
- Each PI is allowed to submit only one proposal meaning that a researcher cannot serve as a PI on more than one proposal.
- All proposals and funded projects shall comply with the applicable South African regulations concerning intellectual property

Proposals submitted by a PI based at a Historically Advantaged Institution without a research partner from a Historically Disadvantaged Institution (HDI) or South Africa's two new universities will be ineligible and will not be submitted for review. The research partner from an HDI in this case can serve as a co-applicant in the proposal. Please note that co-applicants are also required to be in possession of a PhD.

Only the following eight universities will be recognised as HDIs in line with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) Ministerial Statement on university funding: University of Limpopo (UL), University of Fort Hare (UFH), University of Venda (Univen), Walter Sisulu University (WSU), University of the Western Cape (UWC), University of Zululand (UniZulu), Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), and Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (SMU). South Africa's two new universities are: University of Mpumalanga (UMP) and Sol Plaatje University (SPU).

Please note that private companies and for-profit entities are not eligible to apply as coordinators but may participate as collaborators or stakeholders if relevant.

1.3 Reasons for Exclusion

- Lack of any one of the eligibility requirements listed in point 1.2 above;
- incomplete application, including additional documents where applicable, see point 3 below;
- proposals submitted in different priority research areas by the collaborating PIs in the two countries;
- proposals submitted to only one of the two Parties;
- for South African applicants, failure to provide the required evidence of meaningful HDI participation, including the corresponding scientific role and budget allocation, where applicable under NRF rules.

2. PRIORITY RESEARCH AREAS

Project proposals, for both funding schemes, must be submitted in one of the following priority research areas:

- **Frontier Digital Technologies and Data-Intensive Sciences,** including Artificial Intelligence, High Performance Computing, Quantum Technologies, Astrophysics and Radio Astronomy. Within this area, proposals involving AI applications with clear "benefits of society", including social, societal and rural development applications, are particularly encouraged.

- **Health, Biotechnologies and One Health,** including but not limited to medical, agricultural, industrial, environmental and marine biotechnologies, infectious diseases, pandemic prevention and preparedness, vaccines, and enabling technologies.

- **Sustainability, Biodiversity and Community Resilience**, including renewable energies, community energy solutions, ecosystem protection, sustainable wildlife management, biodiversity monitoring and restoration, climate resilience, and circular economy approaches.

Proposals submitted in other research areas will not be considered for evaluation.
Funding decisions will be taken on the basis of scientific quality, strategic relevance, budget availability, and overall balance across the priority research areas.

3. SUBMISSION PROCEDURES

Joint project proposals must be submitted to both Parties, must be written in English, and must have the same duration as the EP, namely 3 years, 2027-2029.

Italian Party

- Proposals shall be submitted exclusively online, by filling in the dedicated forms at the following link: https://granderilevanza.esteri.it
  For any inquiry concerning the present call, please contact: dgce11.bandi3@esteri.it
- For projects involving experiments with animals, the status of ethics approval by the competent Ethics Committee must be provided when submitting the proposal. Please note that formal authorization by the competent Ministry of Health is mandatory to start the activities (D.Lgs 26/2014 and Directive 2010/63/EU). Proof of submission to the institutional OPBA (Organismo Preposto al Benessere degli Animali) is acceptable at proposal stage. Projects involving experiments with human beings must be performed in accordance with Regulation 536/2014/EU. The Italian Principal Investigator should include a self-declaration of compliance with the above-mentioned rules in the Methods section of the proposal.
- Applications must be accompanied by an endorsement letter signed by the legal representative of the applying Institution, or by a delegate duly authorized by formal provision. The letter, which must be written in Italian using the template available for download at the same URL of the present call (https://granderilevanza.esteri.it), should acknowledge the submission and provide official acceptance of all conditions listed in the call text, including the institutional co-funding listed in the provisional budget section of the proposal. Moreover, if the PI holds a temporary position, the endorsement letter must also certify that, should the contract be terminated before the end of the project, the Institution will replace the PI with another member of the research team, thus ensuring that research activities are carried out without any interruption. The endorsement letter must be uploaded to the webpage available at the link: https://granderilevanza.esteri.it Additional information, such as the strategic significance of the bilateral cooperation, may also be included.

South African Party

Applications must be submitted through an online application process to the NRF through the link: https://nrfconnect.nrf.ac.za

Applicants should refer to the "General Application Guide 2026" for assistance on the steps to follow when applying for research grants. The relevant link will be published on: https://www.nrf.ac.za/funding/

PIs must attach the required compulsory documents in PDF format in the following order:

- CVs of partner Principal Investigators;
- Budgets of partner Principal Investigators;
- Budget division of the South African team, in particular budget sharing between historically advantaged institutions and HDIs;
- Brief description of the scientific role, work packages and responsibilities attributed to HDI partners, where applicable.

Failure to submit compulsory documents will result in the disqualification of the application and will make the entire project consortium ineligible.

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4. EVALUATION OF PROPOSALS AND SELECTION AT NATIONAL AND BILATERAL LEVEL

4.1 Evaluation process

After closure of the call, all submitted proposals will undergo a formal eligibility check before moving to the two-step evaluation process. The first step will be performed at national level to identify a shortlist of proposals. The second step of the evaluation process will be performed at bilateral level. The two Parties will reach consensus on the final list of projects eligible for funding during the meeting of the Joint Commission, which includes representatives from both countries. The selected projects will be included in the text of the Executive Programme that will be published on the websites of both Parties at the end of the process, see point 4.2 below.

Project proposals will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

- Scientific relevance of the proposed research;
- Methodology and documentation;
- Qualification and expertise of the research teams;
- Added value of the bilateral cooperation;
- Contribution to capacity building and human capital development, including the meaningful involvement of early-career researchers and, on the South African side, the effective participation of researchers from HDIs;
- Exploitation and dissemination of the results;
- Budget adequacy;
- Potential for technology transfer and socio-economic application, where relevant;
- Potential contribution to technological advancement, including measurable TRL progression where appropriate to the nature of the project.

While scientific excellence will remain the primary evaluation criterion, in cases of comparable scientific quality, preference will be given to proposals that:

- involve more than one national research organization, public or private non-profit, within each participating country;
- demonstrate clear application pathways, socio-economic relevance and/or industrial impact, including, where applicable, a letter of Expression of Interest from an industrial partner;
- include the active participation of researchers from Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) on the South African side, beyond the minimum eligibility requirements, in line with national policies promoting inclusivity and equitable research development;
- ensure the active involvement of early-career researchers, such as doctoral students, postdoctoral fellows, and young investigators, with clearly defined and meaningful roles within the project.

4.2 Outcome of the evaluation

Italian Party: The official text of the Executive Programme, including the list of selected projects, will be published on the MAECI website at the following link: https://www.esteri.it/it/diplomazia-culturale-e-diplomazia-scientifica/cooperscientificatecnologica/programmiesecutivi/accordi_programmi_culturali_tecnologici/
Only the PIs of the selected projects will be directly informed by e-mail about the outcome of the selection process.

South African Party: The NRF will inform the South African applicants of the outcome of the review process. For successful projects, the NRF conditions will be detailed in the "Conditions of Grant" contract to be signed between the researchers and the NRF during the award process.

5. FUNDING PROCEDURES

Italian Party
Funding will be granted to the projects listed in the Executive Programme within the limits of the available annual resources of each Party.
The contribution granted by MAECI is intended as co-funding support for the project, and therefore co-funding by the coordinating Italian Institution of approximately 50% of the total costs of the project is mandatory. Co-funding can include salaries of the involved personnel and indirect costs. Any other financial contribution from public or private, Italian or South African institutions, will be positively evaluated.

First year **Beginning of the project – 31st December**	**Second year** **1st January – 31st December**	**Third and last year** **1st January – 31st December**	**The year after the end of the project**
• 100% of the first year MAECI co-funding in advance to be entirely spent between 1 January and 31 December of the first year	• Second year expenses anticipated by the coordinating institution • Check of expenses incurred during the first year	• Third year expenses anticipated by the coordinating institution • Refund of expenses incurred between 1st January and 31st December of the second year	• Refund of expenses incurred between 1st January and 31st December of the third and last year

The contribution granted by MAECI will be based on the 3-year original budget proposal.

- A **first** instalment, amounting to 100% of the first-year MAECI co-funding (and approximately to 33% of the total MAECI co-funding) will be provided in advance, upon presentation of a letter certifying the beginning of project activities. Any unspent amount must be refunded to MAECI.
- The expenses for the **second year** (approximately amounting to 33% of the total MAECI co-funding) will be anticipated by the coordinating institution and reimbursed by MAECI during the third year, upon submission and positive evaluation of scientific reports and financial reporting documents.
- Similarly, the expenses for the **third year** (approximately amounting to 33% of the total MAECI co-funding) will be anticipated by the coordinating institution and reimbursed by MAECI after the end of the project, upon submission and positive evaluation of scientific reports and financial reporting documents.

Funding procedures timeline

Budget example

	MAECI co-funding	Percentage
First year	30.000€	33,3%
Second year	30.000€	33,3%
Third year	30.000€	33,3%
TOTAL	90.000€	100%

or

	MAECI co-funding	Percentage
First year	32.000€	35,6%
Second year	30.000€	33,3%
Third year	28.000€	31,1%
TOTAL	90.000€	100%

For projects presented by IRCCS institutions, in order to accelerate the eligibility check process, the Ministry of Health will grant an eligibility clearance to the applicants before the submission of the proposals. To that end, the PIs must fill out and return an eligibility check form through Workflow della Ricerca (WdR System, https://ricerca.cbim.it/), using ER communication code, before submitting their proposals to MAECI. Applicants must therefore adhere to the Italian Ministry of Health regulations.

South African Party

The actual costs of travel, including airfares, accommodation, ground transport, subsistence and medical insurance, should be determined and calculated based on individual institutional travel policies and must be in line with the regulations in force in each country. No additional funding will be provided by the NRF under this programme, therefore South African researchers are expected to top up these funds should there be a need.
NRF fundable items can include the following costs:
Research-related costs (interviews, surveys, laboratory experiments, research-related trips)
Small equipment
Consumables
Postdoctoral research support
Mini research sabbaticals by young researchers
Science Engagement

5.3 Monitoring, Reporting and Performance Review
All funded projects shall be subject to scientific and financial reporting in accordance with the procedures of the respective Parties.
In addition to the regular reporting requirements, the Parties may conduct:

- a mid-term performance review, normally during the second year of project implementation, to assess progress against objectives, quality of bilateral cooperation, capacity-building results, and, where relevant, prospects for application, dissemination and technology transfer;
- a final assessment at the end of the project, in order to evaluate the scientific results achieved, the effectiveness of the bilateral collaboration, the involvement of early-career researchers, and, where applicable, the contribution to technological advancement and/or innovation pathways.

The outcome of these reviews may be taken into account by the Parties for the continuation of funding, the final settlement of administrative procedures, and future bilateral programming activities.

6. CONTACT INFORMATION
For additional information on the present call, applicants may refer to the following contacts:

In Italy
Office XI - Directorate General for Growth and Export Promotion of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI)

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