



BRICS STI Framework Programme Pilot STI Flagship Projects Call 2026.

Researcher submission deadline: 16 June 2026

DA submission deadline: 22 June 2026

(On the NRF website at <https://nrfconnect.nrf.ac.za>)

South African applicants must consult their institutions for internal closing date.

A maximum of 3 joint projects will be funded for this call (1 project per thematic area)

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1. Background

The BRICS group of funding organizations, namely National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (Brazil), Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST, China), Science, Technology & Innovation Funding Authority (STDF, Egypt), Department of Science and Technology (DST, India), Iran National Science Foundation (INSF, Iran), Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MSHE, Russia) and National Research Foundation (NRF, South Africa) hereinafter referred to as the Member Organizations (“MOs”) and Russian Center for Science Information hereinafter referred to as the BRICS STI Framework Programme Secretariat – outline an arrangement between them in support of Multilateral Interdisciplinary Research and Innovation Funding in the BRICS STI Framework Programme (“the Initiative”).

The Initiative is a special action implemented in line with the BRICS STI FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME TERMS OF REFERENCE adopted on Annual Meeting of the BRICS Science, Technology and Innovation Funding Working Group held in Moscow (Russia) on 24-25 September 2024.

The BRICS STI Framework Programme aims to promote research, development and innovation in the main areas of cooperation among the institutions in the consortia which consist of partners from BRICS countries.

As one of the BRICS STI Framework Programme special actions research funding organizations from the BRICS countries have agreed to jointly establish a new call for flagship projects: **BRICS STI Framework Programme Pilot STI Flagship Projects Call 2026**.

2. Aims of the programme

The BRICS STI Framework Programme aims to support research and development projects that are of strategic importance to BRICS member states. BRICS STI Flagship Projects should focus on global challenges, be of mission oriented approach and address common challenges of the BRICS countries. BRICS STI Flagship Projects should lead to a strong impact, whether it will be a technological advancement, societal or scientific impact. BRICS STI Flagship Projects aim at the horizontal and/or vertical integration of the value chain and thus at the technological feasibility of systems solutions with a long-term potential for growth. BRICS STI Flagship Projects serve to strengthen an STI sector or branch or to generate model solutions to important challenges faced by society.

STI Flagship Projects are inter-disciplinary in scope, led by accomplished scientists (and related personnel) from BRICS countries, and preferably have begun to generate high impact results.

3. Areas of Cooperation

The Pilot BRICS STI Framework Programme Flagship Projects Call 2026 covers the following three thematic topics:

1. Digital Earth.
2. Psycho-molecular tools.
3. BRICS Intelligent Telescope and Data Network.

Please note: the attached *“BRICS STI Framework Programme”* for a full description on each thematic area mentioned above.

4. Duration of the projects

Projects will be supported for a maximum period of three years (2027 to 2029).

5. Eligibility criteria

The BRICS STI Framework Programme Member Organizations shall invite applicants from their countries to identify potential partners in at least three other BRICS countries and to jointly prepare proposals for collaborative R&D projects in the three thematic topics of the call. A total of at least four countries should be represented by partners involved in the project's implementation.

Only Working researchers/scientists residing in South Africa and affiliated with a recognised South African public higher education or research institution such as a university, university of technology or science council are eligible to apply. South African Principal Investigators (and HDI based co-applicants) must be in possession of a PhD. South African researchers are not allowed to serve as Principal Investigators (or research partners) on more than 1 project proposal.

It is “mandatory” for South African PIs based at historically advantaged institutions (and science councils) to include, as part of the consortium, a research partner from a historically disadvantaged institution. Proposals submitted by an applicant based at a historically advantaged institution without a research partner from a historically disadvantaged institution will be ineligible (and will not be submitted for review). The research collaborator from the historically disadvantaged institution in this case will serve as a co applicant in the proposal.

Applicants based at historically disadvantaged institutions including those based at the two new universities, i.e. the Sol Plaatje University (SPU) and the University of Mpumalanga (UMP), can act as PIs and submit proposals without the involvement of and/or partnering with researchers based at historically advantaged institutions if they so wish. Please note that only the following eight universities are currently recognised as historically disadvantaged in line with the Department of Higher Education and Training November 2019 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), University of Mpumalanga and Sol Plaatje University.

Private higher education institutions are not eligible to apply under this programme. A multi-institutional/consortia approach will be preferred. Therefore, applicants are allowed to collaborate with other partners such as NGOs or companies. However, the SMEs, private companies, and NGO participants cannot serve as PIs and are expected to meet their participation costs in the joint project.

Please note:

- Cooperation projects with the potential to be sustained beyond the funding period will be favourably considered.
- Only joint proposals that involve at least three or more partners from the BRICS countries will be considered for funding.
- Joint projects that involve young researchers (through reciprocal research visits and mini sabbaticals), postdoctoral fellows and pay attention to government equity targets by ensuring a balanced involvement of female and black researchers will be positively considered and will receive a higher rating.

- In terms of South Africa's transformation agenda applications from previously disadvantaged individuals and the involvement of historically disadvantaged higher education and research institutions will be prioritised.

6. Eligible research activities

Applicants are requested to submit inter-disciplinary in scope proposals for BRICS STI Flagship projects which correspond to the following core elements:

- Clear specification of a long-term mission with a research agenda comprising short and intermediate goals to realize a common vision;
- A track record of high-impact scientific contributions and strong scientific leadership and excellence;
- Inter-disciplinary approach, drawing in scientists from at least two fields of science and related personnel from a range of different disciplines and sectors, including non-academia, to the value of the projects.

Funds can be used to cover the following costs:

- **Research-related costs** - activities to be supported may include expenses relating to field work such as conducting interviews, surveys, laboratory experiments, research-related trips, small equipment (consumables), etc. Airfare, accommodation, ground transport and subsistence should be calculated using rates as stipulated in institutional travel policies.
- **Reciprocal research visits/ mini sabbaticals by young researchers** - the placements should enable the postgraduate students within the project to learn valuable new skills or techniques; access facilities or resources not readily available at home; build relationships with potential new collaborators; and advance complementary collaborative research. The duration of each placement is expected to be 3-6 months with flexibility to split the placement into several shorter visits. Longer placements may be undertaken where this would add value and these should be justified within the application. Placements must enhance, not replace, the standard training and study support that the postgraduate students receive. These placements must be managed to fit within the original funded period of the studentship. Additional funding will not be made available through this Call to support studentship extensions for those undertaking international placements. Applicants should include information about how these reciprocal research visits will be managed. Funds within this programme can only be used for these reciprocal research visits/ mini sabbaticals and not for scholarship/ bursary/ students fees. The onus is on the PIs (and doctoral students) to secure funding for educational expenses of participating students. Doctoral students are hereby advised to apply for scholarship through the NRF call for Student Support which opens the beginning of April each year.
- **Knowledge sharing costs (science engagement)** - in support of project-related activities, such as joint workshops, seminars, conferences, symposia, lecturer presentations, meetings, local and regional dissemination of results to relevant stakeholders.

In the case of meetings, research visits and exchanges of scientists, personnel, and experts, as well as reciprocal visits undertaken as part of joint research projects and the attendance of seminars, symposia and other meetings funded under this programme, the sending side will be responsible for financing international travel, visas, medical insurance, accommodation and living expenses. Fees relating to the

organisation of events (venue, catering, audio-visual equipment etc.) will also be the financial responsibility of the host investigator which is to be paid from his/ her allocation of the joint funding.

The following are **NOT** to be funded from the NRF funds allocation:

- Consultant's fees
- Large equipment
- Project management fees
- Overheads
- Salaries and temporary staff fees
- Educational expenses (scholarships/ bursaries/ student fees/ educational expenses, etc.). Doctoral students in need of financial support are advised to apply for scholarship through the NRF call for student support which opens the beginning of April each year.

7. Funding regulations

The total amount requested from the NRF should not exceed R1 500 000 per project. Funding will be made available for a maximum of 3-years, to be paid in annual instalments (R 500 000 per project per year) and exclusively for research activities commence mid-2027.

Please Note:

- Should you be successful you will be funded only for the activities within the scope of these guidelines.
- Scientific and financial reporting on the project is an **OBLIGATORY** condition of funding in subsequent years.
- Requested amounts do not necessarily imply that this amount will be awarded upon selection for funding.

8. Application procedure

Applicants should submit their applications by following the steps below:

Procedure for Submitting a Joint Application Form (JAF):

- Applicants must submit the JAF (**mandatory**) directly to the BRICS Call Secretariat. All the information on this process can be found through the link: http://brics-sti.org/files/JAF_BRICS_fpcall_2026.docx. The deadline for the submission of pre-proposals to the BRICS Call Secretariat is **16th June 2026, 15:00 Moscow Time (UTC+3)**.
- A project consortia must choose an overall Project Coordinator who will take the responsibility for completing and submitting the Joint Application Form (JAF) to the Call Secretariat (via BRICS STI FP AMS at <http://brics-sti.org/?p=new/41>). Other project partners do not have to submit any additional proposals to the Call Secretariat, so only one JAF per single project is required.

Procedure for Submitting a Proposal to NRF:

- South African applications must be submitted through an online application process to the NRF through the link: <https://nrfconnect.nrf.ac.za>.
- Please make use of the 'General Application Guide 2024 for assistance on the steps to follow when applying for international research grants. The link to the guide is available on this web page: <https://www.nrf.ac.za/funding/>.
- The deadline for researchers to submit to the NRF is **16 June 2026 (23:59 SAST)**.
- The deadline for DA submission to the NRF is **22 June 2026 (23:59 SAST)**.

Please note that failure to submit a full proposal to the NRF will make the entire project consortium ineligible.

When submitting to the NRF, South African SA PIs **must** attach the required **compulsory documents** in PDF format in the following order:

- Joint Application Form (JAF)
- CVs of partner Principal Investigators.
- Budgets of partner Principal Investigators.
- Budget division of the South African team.

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

The call process is highly competitive therefore application does not guarantee funding. The evaluation of applications from all countries should have positive ratings before consideration for funding. The NRF and BRICS Call Secretariat will not be held responsible for non-submission, administration or evaluation of the application in the partner countries.

Please note the attached "**Frequently Asked Questions document**" for further details on the application procedure.

9. Review process

Following the closing date indicated, applications will be subject to a scientific peer review. The panel will include recognised local experts in the various fields of research represented by the proposals received. These experts will evaluate each proposal based on the following broad criteria:

- Scientific quality and innovation of the joint research plan
- Competence and expertise of teams and complementarities of consortium (interdisciplinary / all necessary expertise)
- Expected impacts: e.g. scientific, technological, economic, societal
- Horizontal and/or vertical integration of the value chain and thus at the technological feasibility of systems solutions with a long-term potential for growth.
- Serve to strengthen an STI sector or branch or to generate model solutions to important challenges faced by society.
- Outcome of the project should have at least the technology readiness level at System/process prototype demonstration in an operational environment

- Project Sustainability: The extent to which the project demonstrates potential for long-term continuation, impact, and follow-up activities after the conclusion of the funding period.
- Sound project management, methodological approach, feasibility and appropriateness of the joint research plan
- Added value to be expected from the research collaboration, balanced cooperation
- Appropriateness of resources and funding requested
- Opportunities for early career researchers
- Encouragement of the participation and joint research by the business sector.

Following local evaluation, a shortlist of projects to be funded will be constituted through consultations between the NRF and the other BRICS partners based on the results of the evaluations done in all countries.

Please note:

Although all Parties undertake to execute the evaluation and selection process as quickly as possible so as to notify applicants of the results as soon as possible, the nature of the multilateral process requires the alignment of the commencement of each phase of the process with the partnering countries, whose schedules may differ significantly.

Following the closing date indicated, applications will be screened for eligibility before being subjected to a scientific peer review. Should the application be rejected during the screening phase, researchers have a maximum of **three working days**, from the date of email receipt, to query the outcomes of the screening phase.

10. Projects follow-up and reporting

Principal Investigators are expected to submit progress reports to the NRF annually. Scientific and financial reporting on the project is an obligatory condition of funding in subsequent years.

A final scientific and financial report will be submitted in English by the South African PI and the other project leaders no more than three months after the end of the project.

The report should mention the outputs of the projects compared with the objectives and aims of the proposal.

The joint publications by the researchers will mention the support from the NRF and partner organisations.

11. Science engagement

Science engagement refers to scientific and initiative activities, events, interventions, or interactions characterised by mutual learning and dialogue among people of varied backgrounds, scientific expertise, and life experiences, who articulate and discuss their perspectives, ideas, knowledge, and values. It is an overarching term for all aspects of public engagement through suitable communication channels with science, science awareness, science education, science communication, and science outreach, aiming to develop and benefit individuals and society. The NRF supports science engagement by coordinating and implementing the Department of Science and Innovation's Engagement Strategy. The strategy embraces a broad understanding of science, encompassing systematic knowledge spanning (natural and physical

sciences, engineering sciences, medical sciences, agricultural sciences, mathematics, social sciences and humanities, and technology) all aspects of the innovation chain and indigenous knowledge. Therefore, researchers funded through the NRF programmes must contribute to science engagement and report the related outputs in their project's progress report.

12. Intellectual property

The researchers of each country, particularly the leaders, must take adequate steps to ensure the protection and sharing of the intellectual property that could result from the joint projects.

13. Impact

Applicants are encouraged to ensure that their research have relevance and potential for impact beyond the academic world, such as in societal, technical, economical, or cultural realms. In line with this, applicants may include societal or industry partners within their projects or consider how relevant stakeholders can be involved in, or benefit from, the design and realisation of the proposed research project. These stakeholders, however, must cover their own costs of participation in the joint projects. In this regard, the NRF aims to facilitate sustainable institutional links between partnering countries by building on existing, outstanding and established research partnerships, and fostering new linkages and engagements with small cohorts of young and emerging researchers for new linkages.

14. Ethical considerations

In conjunction with the institution, it is the responsibility of the grant-holder to ensure that all research activities carried out in or outside South Africa comply with the laws and regulations of South Africa and/or the foreign country in which the research activities are conducted. These include all human and animal subjects, copyright and intellectual property protection, and other regulations or laws, as appropriate. A research ethics committee must review and approve the ethical and academic rigor of all research prior to the commencement of the research and acceptance of the grant. The awarded amount will not be released for payment if a copy of the required ethical clearance certificate, as indicated in the application, is not attached to the Conditions of Grant. Please also refer to the "Statement on Ethical Research and Scholarly Publishing Practices" on the NRF website <https://www.nrf.ac.za/statement-on-ethical-research-and-scholarly-publishing-practices/>.

15. Protection of personal information

The National Research Foundation ensures compliance with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), Act 4 of 2013, committing to ensure the privacy of those submitting applications and proposals to the NRF on the NRF Connect (<https://nrfconnect.nrf.ac.za/>). The National Research Foundation will protect the personal information provided by applicants or the third party against misuse, loss, unauthorised access, modification, or disclosure. The Privacy Policy of the NRF outlines the practices relating to the protection of personal information and can be accessed on the NRF website at <https://www.nrf.ac.za/privacy-policy>.

16. Submission deadline

- The deadline for JAF submission to Call Secretariat is **15 June 2026** (15:00 Moscow Time, UTC+3)
- The deadline for submission to NRF is **15 June 2026** (23:59 SAST).
- The deadline for DA submission to the NRF is **20 June 2026** (23:59 SAST).

Applications received after the closing dates will not be considered for funding. Researchers are also advised to ensure that their research partners' applications are submitted and received in the partner countries.

17. Contact details

South Africa

National Research Foundation (NRF)

For programme-content related queries

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