COR NTD
COALITION FOR OPERATIONAL RESEARCH ON NEGLECTED TROPICAL DISEASES

frican Research Network for Neglected Tropical Diseases
ARNTD
...towards an NTD free Africa

This document serves as a guide for the peer review committee assessing applications submitted in response to the call for funding as part of the Small Grants Program.

ARNTD, August 2022

AFRICAN RESEARCHERS' SMALL GRANTS PROGRAM

Reviewer's Guide

1. Highlights of the Funding Opportunity

1.1 Background

The African Research Network for Neglected Tropical Diseases (ARNTD) with support from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (Gates Foundation), through the Coalition for Operational Research on Neglected Tropical Diseases (COR-NTD), is seeking proposals for both operational and implementation research on ''Emerging Challenges facing Neglected Tropical Disease (NTD) program implementation in Africa.'' This sixth edition of the Small Grants Program (SGP VI) is to support African researchers in both early and mid/late career to undertake operational or implementation research aligned with the goals established in the London Declaration on Neglected Tropical Diseases. SGP is comprised of two small grant funding tracks:

a. Small grants for junior researchers
b. Small grants for mid-career and/or senior researchers.

1.2 Objectives

1. To increase African leadership, involvement and visibility in NTD operational and social science research, including through direct engagement with national NTD programs;
2. To contribute to improving the research capacity of an existing cadre of African NTD researchers and strengthening African research institutions in the process by supporting operational and implementation research on NTDs that is locally originated and African-led;
3. To improve South-South communication and collaboration among researchers, policymakers and implementers, and for community participation in research and agenda-setting;
4. To provide an opportunity for young upcoming researchers not only to gain experience in research, but also in preparation of grant applications and management;
5. To supplement a clearly defined aspect of ongoing research or to answer a new question linked to ongoing research being carried out by mid-career/senior researchers;
6. To encourage a model of North-South collaboration which promotes engagement between researchers in the South and their control programs, and improves local leadership and ownership of initiatives and activities.

1.3 Eligible Projects

In order to be considered for funding, the proposed research must be informed by existing evidence and identified gaps. Proposals must demonstrate significant potential to inform or develop further research activities. **The program duration of this edition is 10 months**. Applicants must therefore provide clear evidence by stating specific variables which will ensure the completion of the projects within the 10 months' timeline of the program. Applications must focus on the five preventive chemotherapy (PC) NTDs (i.e. Lymphatic filariasis, Onchocerciasis, Soil transmitted helminthiasis, Schistosomiasis and Trachoma) Eligible proposals may focus on:

Implementation and/or operational research that aims to improve the effectiveness of NTD programs. This may include:

- Identifying factors that hinder equitable delivery of NTD program interventions to vulnerable groups.
- Developing, testing, and scaling practical solutions that are evidence-based, adaptive, and context-specific.

- Identifying ways to improve uptake, adaptation, and adoption of existing evidence-based strategies, tools to achieve elimination and control targets.
- Studies to develop or validate innovative new diagnostic technologies to support NTD program implementation and improvement in operations.

This edition of the Small Grants Program includes several new focus areas:

- Testing new models for post-validation surveillance or integrated surveillance strategies for trachoma and lymphatic filariasis. As NTD programs achieve success and scale down mass drug administration, implementing surveillance as part of program monitoring and evaluation to assure that program goals are sustained has emerged as a priority.
- Development of scalable solutions to the integration of morbidity management and disease prevention (MMDP) services into the national health system
- Developing and testing cost-effective, scalable, community-based strategies for vector collection and xenomonitoring in onchocerciasis and lymphatic filariasis hotspots
- Testable solutions to improve equitable access to NTD interventions for vulnerable populations (e.g. nomads, groups in conflict zones, hard-to-reach areas, refugees, etc.

The proposed research must be informed by existing evidence and identified gaps in order to be considered for funding, and proposals must demonstrate significant potential to inform or develop further research programs. One aim of the small grants for junior researchers is for young upcoming researchers not only to gain experience in research but also in preparation of grant applications and management. A key feature of the small grants targeted at mid-career/senior researchers is that they can be used to supplement a clearly defined aspect of ongoing research or to answer a new question linked to ongoing research.

1.4 Ineligible Projects

SGP funding cannot be used for paying salaries, participating in meetings/conferences, payment of tuition/course fees, purchase of restricted commodities (e.g., contraception, pesticides, pharmaceuticals, vehicles, etc.), and for supporting existing programmatic M&E activities such as, but not limited to, mapping, mass drug administration, transmission assessment surveys (TAS), Kato-Katz impact evaluations, trachoma impact surveys/surveillance surveys, data quality assessments, onchocerciasis impact evaluations, onchocerciasis Stop MDA surveys, coverage surveys, knowledge attitude perception surveys, etc.).

2. Eligibility of Applicants

2.1 General criteria:

1. Must be currently employed or enrolled as a student in an academic, health, or research institution in Africa for the duration of the grant
2. Must demonstrate a commitment to NTD-related research as well as the skills and experience required to carry out the proposed work

3. Must be able to provide evidence of research output, including publications and/or presentations at scientific conferences
4. Applications are accepted from all African countries. We particularly encourage applications from the following countries that have not yet had an applicant: Algeria, Cabo Verde, Comoros, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Guinea, Lesotho, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Niger, Sao Tome and Principe, Seychelles, and Tunisia
5. We especially encourage female researchers to apply.

2.2 Specific to applicants for the junior researchers' grants:

1. Must be an early career researcher, defined as a basic biomedical scientist, clinically qualified investigator or public health researcher, who has not previously competed successfully as principal investigator for a major research grant i.e. ≥USD 200,000
2. Must hold at least a Master's degree or should be actively enrolled in doctoral studies. Applicants holding a doctoral degree (e.g. PhD, DrPH, DSc) must have graduated no more than five years ago. Clinicians (e.g. MBChB, MBBS, MD, DVM holders), who have not completed a Master's degree must have some specialist training (e.g. Membership, Fellowship) or be able to demonstrate relevant research training/experience
3. Must not currently hold positions above lecturer/assistant professor level or equivalent.
4. Must be able to provide written evidence of commitment to providing mentorship and supervision from a senior researcher with a track record and ongoing commitment to NTD research.

2.3 Specific to applicants for the mid-career/senior researchers' grants:

1. Must be a mid-career/senior researcher, defined as a basic biomedical scientist, clinically qualified investigator or public health researcher, who has previously competed successfully as principal investigator for a major research grant, but is no more than fifteen years from their highest degree of study
2. Must hold a doctoral degree (e.g. PhD, DrPH, DSc). Clinicians (e.g. MBChB, MBBS, MD, DVM holders), who have not completed a PhD must have completed specialist training (e.g. Fellowship) or be able to demonstrate relevant training tied to research (e.g. MSc, MPhil), or experience
3. Must hold a position no lower than Senior lecturer/Senior Scientific Officer level or equivalent
4. Must demonstrate that they have a track record and ongoing commitment to NTD research.

3. Funds Available

The small grants targeted at junior and senior researchers at the Masters or PhD level will provide grants ranging from USD 10,000 - 30,000.

4. Roles and Responsibilities

4.1 Review Committee Members

The Review Committee shall be composed of all seven members of the ARNTD Management Board (which doubles as a scientific Review Committee); members of the Social Science, Policy and Implementation Research Group of ARNTD; representatives from COR-NTD; and a representative from USAID. The following are the primary responsibilities of the committee members:

- Once review assignments are sent out in an Excel spreadsheet, indicate any possible conflict of interest (CoI) for each assigned application by filling out the attached CoI before carrying out the reviews
- Using the scoring guide and review submission form provided, score each assigned application, enter into the rating box provided, and enter specific comments within the text boxes provided
- Abide by generally accepted guidelines on confidentiality and conflict of interest (see section on General Considerations).

4.2 ARNTD Secretariat

Based on the call, the ARNTD Secretariat along with external reviewers will first screen proposals for:

- Eligibility of the individual for either junior or mid-career researchers' grants
- Eligibility of the proposed work to be funded
    - Focusses on one or a combination of any of the five preventive chemotherapy (PC) NTDs
    - Focusses on some other disease of poverty but includes one of the five preventive chemotherapy (PC) NTDs or shows a contribution to efforts to help control one or more of the PC NTDs
    - Focusses on improving equitable access to NTD interventions for vulnerable populations ○ Does not fall into the category of "ineligible projects" listed in 1.4 above

The ARNTD Secretariat will not check for content but only for eligibility based on the Call.

A proposal will not qualify for review if the application is not complete (e.g. budget not submitted using the right template), or the individual does not meet both the general eligibility criteria and the criteria specific to either the junior researchers' or the mid-career/senior researchers' grant depending on what was applied for. All proposals that are not eligible for consideration based on the Call will not be advanced for review, and the applicant will be informed accordingly. Because SGP Calls receive significantly high numbers of applications, the ARNTD Secretariat will not be able to comment in detail on the specific aspects of each application which resulted in their disqualification for review or funding.

All proposals that meet the eligibility criteria will be advanced for review. The ARNTD Secretariat will:

- Assign eligible applications to committee members;
- Provide guidelines and support to the review committee members.

5. Review Process

Each application will be assigned to three (3) independent reviewers. Each reviewer will receive an Excel sheet with a description of the submissions that have been assigned to them. Reviewers will need to indicate whether or not they have any conflict of interest and are in a position to review the assigned submissions. Once a reviewer indicates that they have no conflict of interest in relation to their review assignments sent out in an Excel spreadsheet, the full submissions of their assigned applicants will be sent to them for review along with a review submission form which will capture their reviews (scores and comments). Reviewers can then commence reviewing applications. If after receiving the full submission of an applicant, a reviewer realizes there is considerable concern for conflict of interest, the reviewer should notify the Secretariat immediately for a replacement and re-assignment of that submission. Reviewers are expected to carry out their reviews and submit their completed review report forms to the ARNTD Secretariat by the set deadline. The aim of the reviewer report is to provide an analytical assessment of the application and valuable feedback pertaining to the objectives and evaluation criteria

spelled out in the Call. The review should be well thought-through and succinct, providing unbiased and constructive feedback.

All reviews are to be conducted in line with the "Quality Standards in Research" section(s) of the USAID Scientific Research Policy.

5.1 Review Criteria

At the core of NTD control and elimination operational research is a proof-of concept projects/ideas which demonstrate potential for scale-up to benefit program implementation (control and elimination of NTDs) as proximally as possible and which could be attractive for later funding from other sources. The Implementation research focuses on improving equitable access to NTD interventions for vulnerable populations. Proposals will be evaluated on the following criteria:

- Excellence/Technical Merit
- Potential Impact
- Research Conduct and Management
- Appropriateness of Budget

5.2 Excellence/Technical Merit (30%)

- The application is well written with clear objectives, concept is technically sound, and project is feasible within the grant funding timeline
- Applicant provides sufficient evidence justifying the importance of the proposed work and identifies clear research, operations, and other gaps in NTD control and elimination
- The application sufficiently provides integrated and innovative disease-specific interventions to address the identified gaps and describes any potential drawbacks, limitations to approaches and offers reasonable alternative mitigation solutions
- Sufficient demonstration that the proposed research or activity is aligned with country/program interests among the selected vulnerable population and/or disease(s) of focus
- The applicant proposes something bold or novel and/or a departure from usual/conventional approaches
- Unless the proposed work is a proof-of-concept, the applicant provides evidence of potential for scale-up to benefit control and elimination of NTDs as proximally as possible, and how the concept may be feasibly implemented, sustained and financially supported.

5.3 Potential Impact (35%)

- Improves field or community-centred drug, diagnostic, operational and other intervention delivery mechanisms
- Demonstrates significant potential to inform further research
- Sufficient demonstration that the proposed research or activity has potential for institutional and/or individual capacity-building impact
- The project shows a path to, and potential for impact at scale. Some markers of potential for scale and sustainability include: involvement of partners who can help the innovation to scale, and alignment to the health plan of the region in which it is being implemented
- Has the potential to change how NTD control and elimination challenges are addressed
- The project outlines plans for transferring knowledge and/or dissemination of results and stakeholder engagement around change actions.

5.4 Research Conduct and Management (20%)

- The applicant fits into the description of either a junior researcher or a mid-career/senior researcher
- The applicant and team have the qualification, experience and skills needed to carry out the proposed activities
- The applicant clearly outlines the roles/responsibilities of the stated team members towards realizing project's intended objectives
- The applicant presents the project in an engaging manner.

5.5 Appropriateness of Budget (15%)

- The budget effectively covers the critical components of the intended research needed for successful execution and completion of the project as a demonstration of the applicant's clear understanding of the proposed research focus
- The approach and budget represent a realistic and reasonable estimation of costs and efficient use of resources
- For the Mid-career/Senior researchers' grants, if the applicant is requesting for funds to be used to supplement an aspect of an ongoing research, determine if the specific activities to which the funds will be applied are clearly defined, and whether there is sufficient justification for this supplementation. Also assess if the application and budget demonstrate the evidence of contributions from co-funding agencies
- Note that SGP funding cannot be used for the following activities. As such if the budget lines contain any of the underlisted, they will ultimately have to be removed if the applicant is made an offer for the grant. Determine if the project will remain viable if these lines are cancelled from the budget:
- Paying salaries *(note that allowances and reimbursements are not necessarily salaries)*
- Participating in meetings/conferences
- Payment of tuition/course fees
- Purchase of restricted commodities (e.g. contraception, pesticides, pharmaceuticals, vehicles, etc.). *(note that purchase of fuel or payment for transportation services for activities such as field work is allowed)*
- Supporting existing/routine program activities. E.g. M&E, mapping, MDA, transmission assessment surveys, impact surveys, surveillance surveys, data quality assessments, coverage surveys, knowledge attitude perception surveys, etc. *(note that If the project focusses on or involves any of these activities, the applicant must demonstrate sufficiently that these are not existing or routine program activities or that they are filling an important gap in these activities)*

Once an application is reviewed and a percentage score is entered into the reviewer's Excel sheet, the score will be scaled to fit the following rating scale. Reviewers are encouraged to take this rating scale into consideration throughout the review.

DESCRIPTOR	RANGE	OUTCOME
Outstanding	4.5-4.9	May be funded
Excellent	4.0-4.4	
Very Good	3.5-3.9	
Acceptable, but low priority	3.0-3.4	Not fundable
Needs revision	2.5-2.9	
Needs major revision	2.0-2.4	
Seriously flawed	1.0-1.9	
Rejected	0.0-0.9	

Once the reviews are completed, shortlisted applicants will be invited to receive support/training via webinars and teleconferences to prepare and submit full proposals and additionally required documents for review by the Secretariat before awards can be confirmed. Shortlisted applicants must note that being shortlisted does not indicate a successful award. Being shortlisted for an award can be revoked if a full proposal and/or required documentation is not submitted by the applicant within the stipulated timeframe.

6. Confidentiality, Conflict of Interest, and Biases

All reviewers must respect the confidentiality of the applications and avoid conflict of interest and biases, taking the following into consideration.

6.1 Confidentiality

Confidentiality is information about a person that shall not be disclosed directly or indirectly to anyone else without that person's prior expressed consent. Reviewers must not disclose the contents of applications to others or utilize any information therein for any other intention than peer review. Reviews must ensure that all Peer Review materials; including any related information, data and documents received from applicants are handled safely, stored in a secure manner to prevent unauthorized access, and disposed of by permanent deletion or shredding (if printed) within 1-month following their completion of the review. Any loss or theft of these materials must be reported to the ARNTD Secretariat.

6.2 Conflict of Interest

A conflict of interest is a conflict between a person's duties and responsibilities with regard to the review process, and that person's private, professional, business or public interests. Some factors to consider when determining if a conflict of interest exists are:

- potential for professional or personal benefit;
- level of leadership or authority;
- professional or personal proximity to the competition or proposal being reviewed, or to an applicant; and,
- direct or indirect financial interest in a competition or proposal being reviewed.

A reviewer is considered to have a conflict of interest with a proposal if he/she:

- is from the same immediate department, institution, organization or company as the applicant, and interacts with the applicant in the course of his/her duties at the department, institution, organization or company;

- has been a student or supervisor of the applicant within the last 5 years;
- is a close personal friend or relative of the applicant;
- has had long-standing professional or personal differences with the applicant;
- is in a position to gain or lose financially from the outcome of the proposal (e.g., holds stock in the company of an industry partner or a competitor); or,
- for some other reason feels that he/she cannot provide an objective review of the proposal. No committee member with any of the above-named conflicts of interest may participate in the review of any part of the proposal.

If the reviewer has been a co-applicant or published with the applicant within the last 2 years and/or has been a student or supervisor of the applicant but not within the last 5 years, it does not preclude them from participating in the review process. However, the reviewer must fully disclose the capacity in which they collaborated, co-applied, or published with the applicant.

6.3 Biases

Reviewers must assess all the applications objectively and without discrimination. Discrimination or bias in the review based on age, nationality, gender, or other factors is unacceptable.