



Funding Instrument:

South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI)

Programme:

Communities of Practice

Document:

Framework & Funding Guide for Communities of Practice

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	3
1.1. contextual background.....	3
1.2. Definition of communities of practice	4
1.3. Policy alignment of communities of practice	5
2. Mission and objectives of the community of practice	6
2.1. MISSION statement of the community of practice	6
2.2. Aim and objectives of the Community of Practices	6
3. Guiding principles and outcomes for the Community of Practice.....	7
3.1. guiding principles of the community of practice	7
3.2. Specific outcomes of the community of practice.....	8
4. OPERATIONAL Principles	9
4.1. Funding models and funding sources	9
4.2. EVALUATION and Key performance indicators	10
5. selection criteria for awarding communities of practice	10
6. References.....	12
7. NRF contact Persons.....	12

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

The country's ability to tackle social challenges is contingent upon the extent to which science and technology play a pivotal role in that process. This sentiment is also echoed by the National Development Plan, stating that, "the extent to which developing economies emerge as economic powerhouses depends on the ability to grasp and apply insights from science and technology and use them creatively", (NDP, 2011; 71). It is then to the advantage of a country to involve established researchers from a range of disciplines in the challenge of responding to development issues such as, *inter alia*, poverty, health and education. South Africa, as a developing country, is at an advantage of having existing expertise from a broad range of research fields, in the form of the South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI) and Centres of Excellence (CoEs) funding instruments. This wealth of expertise is seen as an opportunity to translate high level expertise and knowledge into tangible action plans and actionable policies through the Community of Practice (CoP) forums. Ultimately, the intent is to provide evidence based solutions to societal challenges facing South Africa.

The South African government is focused on implementing the National Development Plan to tackle societal challenges facing the country today and in the future. Racial disparities and inequality continue to shape economic outcomes in South Africa (McKeever, 2023). Despite vigorous interventions in various forms, structural poverty has continued to increase (Bundy, 2020). Furthermore, regardless of a plethora of state-driven corrective policies and programmes – social spending on welfare, education and health; integrated development plans at all tiers of government; land reform and housing provisions, social cohesion remains elusive, undergirded by the spatial segregation of the apartheid past. The impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the increase in the number of people living with HIV/AIDS and the resurgence of tuberculosis are some of the features of 'a strained system' at various levels. Poor schooling and education and inadequate teacher training, especially in rural South Africa, are of concern. Environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and climate change pose urgent challenges to societal development and human well-being (Vijaya, 2024). Addressing these issues requires integrated approaches, including sustainable land management, policy interventions, and technological innovations and largely community involvement. Food security, water, sanitation, energy,

telecommunications, and advanced manufacturing all require sustained, innovative, knowledge-based interventions to bolster the knowledge economy in a growth-driven emergent market such as South Africa. Notwithstanding the significant progress made by the South government in areas such as access to education, research infrastructure and health care; much more still need to be done. Thus, there is an urgent need for societal engagement at various levels.

Communities of Practice thus, provide a vehicle to enable the implementation of integrated trans-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary solutions to address the above-mentioned challenges and to ultimately bring change to the lives of South Africans through evidence-based research findings. The envisaged aim of communities of practice is to provide research-driven innovative solutions that will inform and guide policy development as well as translate research outputs into tangible outcomes with social and/or economic impact.

1.2. DEFINITION OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The need for knowledge based approaches to South Africa's societal challenges, building robust systems of innovation and entrepreneurial capacity call for a coordinated and focused approach that promote knowledge creation, that can help underpin policies and practices supporting human development in key areas for South Africa. It is in particular, important to organize these approaches to tackle South Africa's challenges in a practical manner. Communities of practice are the means to which these collective measures will be achieved. Communities of Practice are defined as Research Chair-led alliances, in which established researchers collaborate to produce solution-oriented research findings with an intention to translate research outputs into tangible outcomes and influence policy development and implementation through communication of the necessary research findings.

A community of Practise as envisaged by the NRF and its partners is are underpinned by the three pillars of;

- i). a domain, represented by the common area of interest
- ii). a community, that is made up of individuals who interact with one another for the purposes of learning and sharing ideas on the domain and,

iii). practise, which involves time spent interacting on the domain in a sustained and frequent manner.

The expectation is for a research chair to lead a community of practice by designing and maintaining oversight on the parameters of the domain to be addressed as well as the expected outcomes. The CoP leader must be supported by a team of experts in the domain, ranging from other researchers in the field to policymakers, practitioners, and members of social strata most impacted by the domain. This team and the leader must then coordinate and steer the community to make it as inclusive and wide-ranging as possible.

In addition to the above-proposed structure, CoPs that are established through a closed process and with specific objectives already identified by funders, a steering committee must be enacted. The role of the steering committee will be to better support the activities of the CoP and to advise on direction and strategy at various intervals.

1.3. POLICY ALIGNMENT OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The NRF is strategically driving towards supporting research for societal impact, the CoPs as a funding instrument provide an opportunity where investment into research can be made with the direct expectation of social impact. Therefore, to ensure that the CoPs respond to both the national and global priorities that the South African government prescribes, proposals submitted for funding need to be aligned with the following policy documents:

1. The South African National Development Plan 2030
2. The White paper on Science and Technology
3. The Department of Science and Innovation Decadal Plan
4. The Medium-Term Development Plan 2025-2030
5. The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals

In Addition to alignment to the above listed policies, CoP leaders and their core teams must develop proposals that have a clear and concise focus on societal problems related to their domain of interest. Therefore, each funded CoP must reflect the **societal impact** that is brought about by the direct or indirect activities of the CoP.

NB: Societal impact broadly refers to the effects of research beyond academia, influencing economic, environmental, cultural, and social outcomes (Doh *et al.*, 2023). For CoPs, societal

impact particularly relates to the effect that an action, decision, research and/or event, has on the structure, well-being, and functioning of a society. Positive societal impact encompasses a wide range of influences, such as economic changes, environmental consequences, shifts in cultural norms, or alterations in social behaviour. It can influence, education outcomes, public health, employment trends, technology, or even national relations. Thus, societal impact serves as a measure of how an initiative, research or project benefits or challenges the broader community. Siemieniako *et al.*, (2021), organised social impact into the following three categories:

Micro-level- involves individual social issues. It includes challenges such as poverty, mental health struggles, education access, and job opportunities that directly affect a person's daily life.

Mezzo-level- encompasses social issues stemming from interaction between members of the CoP and with local communities. The level involves small groups, organizations, or communities, including the CoP and their interactions with local communities

Macro-level: This level is related to broad societal changes and systemic issues that affect populations on a large scale. It encompasses laws, policies, cultural movements, and large-scale social challenges that extend beyond local communities.

2. MISSION AND OBJECTIVES OF THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

2.1. MISSION STATEMENT OF THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

To establish and nurture Research Chair-led alliances within the National System of Innovation to produce solution-orientated research findings, to promote evidence-based analysis, and to inform policy development or the enhancement of policy implementation.

2.2. AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICES

The overall aim of CoPs is to conduct solution-orientated ¹ research on socio-economic challenges and to communicate the research findings in given forums to various stakeholders;

¹ CoPs must not work on new areas of research but instead add on existing knowledge and expertise in order to find solutions.

government officials, practitioners, policymakers, academics and civil society, with an intent to provide solutions that can mitigate social and economic challenges faced by South Africa.

This aim has the following subsidiary objectives:

1. To bridge gaps between scientific research, practical application, and policy development to advance sustainable development and innovation through strategic partnerships,
2. To establish strong interdisciplinary teams through bringing together experts from various fields to develop transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary scientific practices for solving societal challenges through evidence-based research findings,
3. To create communities that connect individuals with shared interests to deepen knowledge and expertise through ongoing interaction, thereby fostering social learning, and
4. To promote collaborative learning processes that support the co-creation and application of knowledge for solution-oriented actions in all decadal plan priority areas.

3. GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND OUTCOMES FOR THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

4.1. GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The CoP must be constituted and guided by the following principles.

1. Research Chairs must voluntarily group themselves to align accordingly to priority areas (i.e. DSTI decadal plan, Call concept documents, etc.) of research and must produce a proposal to bid for funding to the National Research Foundation (NRF).
2. Each CoP must be led by an incumbent of the SARChI funding instrument. The core team and involvement of other members can be much wider and far reaching to include for example other established researchers and representatives from other social structures. The involvement of researchers based at historically disadvantaged Institutions (HDI) as part of the core team is strongly advised. To this end applications should include:
 - A table showing the all key stakeholders that will be impacted by the domain

- List of HDI representatives who will participate in the CoP.
3. Funds will be awarded to CoPs willing to conduct transdisciplinary research that seeks solutions to social and economic issues. The transdisciplinary research approach integrates knowledge from multiple disciplines and engages non-academic stakeholders (e.g., industry professionals, policymakers, or communities) to address complex real-world problems.
 4. Funded CoPs are expected to present solution-focused findings in a biannual forum to various stakeholders; government officials, practitioners, policymakers, academics and civil society.
 5. Access to other intra- and inter - organizational CoP networks that will enhance the knowledge outputs of the CoP.
 6. Each CoP is expected to have an information portal which will store and manage all the intellectual capital and research activities of the network. The long-term objective is to establish an Information Portal as the premiere online knowledge Portal of information, resources, discussion, and interaction about strategically allied research on social matters in South Africa
 7. Each CoP is expected to engage and involve at least two South African post-graduate² students.

4.2. SPECIFIC OUTCOMES OF THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The expected outcomes of the CoP:

1. Each CoP must develop new technologies, tools, or interventions to specific challenges in society and provide evidence-based recommendations for public policy, governance, and regulatory frameworks.
2. Promote collaborative research by increasing the number of patents and commercialised research in collaboration with industry, communities and various networks
3. Avail a network of thinktanks to the CoP stakeholders to ensure easy consultation on specific societal issues.

² students at all levels can be opted into the programme on a remuneration scale for part-time work, as per the institutions guidelines. A minimum of 2 Masters students and 2 PhD Students per CoP is required.

4. A comprehensive report of the CoP workshop detailing recommended development trajectories for the government from the discussions of the proceedings of the knowledge sharing workshops. It is envisaged that the report can be turned into a discussion document or a policy brief.
5. The CoP's core team members must develop a clear communication plan showing how and when the stakeholders will communicate among themselves and the NRF well as when and how the NRF will be involved in key CoP events.
6. Provide a clear plan on how students and Postdoctoral fellows will be involved in the CoP. This helps to show how the CoP will build research capacity and postgraduate students with a focus on societal impact.

4. OPERATIONAL PRINCIPLES

4.1. FUNDING MODELS AND FUNDING SOURCES

Seed funding for each CoP will be provided by the DSTI through the NRF. CoPs must submit a budget with a breakdown of each of the core teams member's proposed budget. This will inform the NRF how much will be awarded to each CoP. The NRF will fund CoPs for a maximum of up to 2 cycles of 3 Years each, that is, up to a total of six (6) years depending on satisfactory performance as determined through a peer review process at the end of the initial cycle. The NRF will fund up to seven (7) million Rands in seed funding per cycle.

Leveraged funds

CoPs are expected to leverage funding for sustainability and continuity, possible sources of funding include:

1. Governmental funding
2. Foundations
3. Private sector funding
4. Development funding
5. International funds

Established Institutions need to provide evidence of leveraged funds on application while HDIs should show evidence of funding commitments from other sources within 6 months of commencement. If a CoP fails to leverage funds in the first cycle of funding, the NRF will not be able to renew the CoP second cycle.

4.2. EVALUATION AND KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

The CoP will be required to submit an Annual Performance Report (APR) and will be evaluated at the end of the funding cycle. Key performance indicators are aligned to the expected outcomes of the CoP, including

1. The number of pilot projects or solutions implemented in real-world settings to solve challenges in a particular community. This includes the success rate of implemented solutions and where possible feedback and impact assessment from the beneficiaries.
2. The extent to which the CoP network has promoted collaborative research that has resulted in registered patents, prototypes and commercialised CoP-driven innovations.
3. The number of research papers, policy briefs, technical reports published, cross-disciplinary collaborations and joint research projects initiated during the CoP lifespan.
4. The extent to which the CoP contribute to measurable improvements in targeted communities (e.g., health, education, economic growth, job creation and capacity building).
5. The degree to which the CoP led to a reduction in social inequalities or increased inclusivity due to its interventions.
6. The amount of external funding secured for research and innovation during the CoP lifecycle.

5. SELECTION CRITERIA FOR AWARDING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The following criteria will be applied when reviewing a CoP application:

Criteria	Weight
The proposal's alignment to the Priority areas ³	25%

³ Consult priority areas as listed in the policy documents listed on page 5

Multi-disciplinarity and trans-disciplinarity of the CoP: The CoP must be diverse and cut across disciplines. Further to that, it must show clear social linkages outside of academia and involvement of other social actors particularly, policy makers, practitioners in the field of the domain and community representatives.	20%
Leverage funding pipeline: Must stipulate the entities that they will approach for funding and the probability of receiving funds. This criterion speaks to sustainability.	15%
Anticipated outputs: Social uptake of solutions arrived at by CoP. In addition training and participation of students in the work packages, resulting patents/other intellectual property, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs.	15%
Anticipated impact: What gap is the research filling and what are the anticipated impact. The proposed plan on how to encourage solution orientated findings. Plan on how to disseminate findings of the CoP and the Science engagement/communication strategy.	20%
Proposed Budget	5%

7. REFERENCES

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