

Higher education cooperation for sustainable development between South-Africa and Flanders (Belgium)

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South Africa is a strategic partner country to VLIR-UOS. Cooperation of Flemish and South African higher education goes back to the mid-1990s.

From 2003 to 2021 VLIR-UOS spent over € 24 million in cooperation with South Africa, including 2 long-term Institutional University Cooperation (IUC) partnerships with the University of Western Cape (UWC) and the University of Limpopo (UL).

The finalised IUC partnerships and 15 ongoing projects are at the center of the cooperation with South Africa.

Higher education as a driving force for sustainable development

Within the South African National Development Plan, **Vision 2030**, higher education was highlighted as a **main driver of change**. Quality education is an important right, which plays a vital role in relation to a person's health, quality of life, self-esteem, and the ability of citizens to be actively engaged and empowered.

VLIR-UOS revised its country approach towards an 'Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development' centred approach. Moreover, VLIR-UOS wants to facilitate connections between different actors and projects present in a given country. With these objectives in mind, the Country Reference Framework (CRF) for South Africa supports teams of academics when identifying and formulating project proposals, by providing a context analysis focused on Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development and the HE sector in South Africa, and by providing an overview of Belgian development actors active in the country, their ongoing projects and partners, in view of exploration of opportunities for synergy and complementarity.

VLIR-UOS cooperation in South Africa has mainly focused on the following themes : **'food security'**, **'natural resources/environment'**, **'health'**, **'social sciences'**, and **'D4D'**. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been mainstreamed into 'Vision 2030', South Africa's long term development plan. This is in line with the objectives of VLIR-UOS on working towards Agenda 2030.

Institutional partnerships

Results of long-term cooperation with University of the Western Cape (UWC)

Between 2003 and 2013 the University of the Western Cape (UWC) was the main partner university to VLIR-UOS in South Africa. The IUC partnership assisted UWC in transforming from a mainly teaching university to a **research based university**.

“The single most important achievement of the programme is that it sharpened the faculties' focus, restored their academic self-confidence, and expedited the rebuilding of capacity in selected areas aligned to the institutional mission”. (Larry Pokpas, UWC)

The partnership translated its overall ambition in the programme title '**Dynamics for Building a Better Society**'. It aimed at contributing with the training of a **new and dynamic generation** for the new South Africa, a society in the midst of complex processes of nation-building. The domains covered were citizenship and democracy, development through sports, HIV prevention and care, water for ecological sustainability, multilingualism and cities in transition and student leadership development. Five **centres of excellence** were established with support of the programme. The one on sports and development is unique in South Africa.

Results of the IUC with University of Limpopo (UL)

In 2010 VLIR-UOS started an IUC partnership with the University of Limpopo (UL) around **human wellness** in a context of global change in rural Africa. The IUC partnership recently ended (Dec. 2021). The main objectives of the partnership were **capacity building (research, education) in strategic domains related to SD challenges, institutional strengthening and community engagement** across the now separated campuses of Turfloop (UL) and Pretoria (SMU). The IUC was based on a **partnership** between UL/SMU and four Flemish universities.

The IUC consisted of **6 specified (sub-)projects** around data management and ICT; multiple literacies; management of chronic diseases; food security; water quality; public health and infectious diseases.

The external evaluations stated that a **solid research platform** has been established and that, in broad terms, implementation has been effective. However, the final stage of the IUC (2020-21) was rendered quite challenging due to the COVID 19 situation.





Focus on SD Challenges

TEAM and Short Initiative (SI) projects are mutually reinforcing projects that aim to strengthen the research and education capacity and to bring into service this capacity to find sustainable solutions to local and global sustainable development challenges.

Health

Primary health care and family medicine is to improve the health of communities through accessible, responsive and **quality health care systems**. Through various VLIR-UOS projects addressing this matter, family physicians were trained which contributed to **interdisciplinary primary health care** services, oriented towards the needs of individuals, their families and the communities in which they live. At the **academic level** there is also a growing need to train epidemiologists and statisticians and to set up interdisciplinary collaborations to address the scientific challenges that the **HIV/AIDS** epidemic poses. Two new projects focus on improving **communication** in health care and on strengthening capacities of **community health care workers**.

Environment

One of the greatest conservation challenges facing us today is the preservation and protection of the **freshwater biodiversity**, both locally and internationally. Owing to the complexity of the biodiversity, any negative influence, such as pollution and uncontrolled abstraction of freshwater from rivers and from aquifers, will have a greater negative influence on these **fragile ecosystems**. These items are addressed in various projects in South Africa and the region. **Long term collaboration** was achieved through joint field expeditions and training programmes that built very strong links between hydrology and ecology.

Social sciences

Despite the truly **multicultural nature** of South-Africa, there is still a lack of expertise in cross-cultural psychology, multiliteracy and the psycho-social burden due to unemployment and disabilities. These and other **socio-economic** issues are being addressed in various projects financed by VLIR-UOS. It is expected that they will play a growing role in the future cooperation with Flemish academics.

Scholarships

Scholarships are powerful tools. It allowed many South-African students to broaden their horizon, learn to look at problems from the perspective of multiple disciplines and to grow into a skilful researcher. On the other hand, Flemish students spent time in a South-African institution and close ties are created.

About the Country Reference Frameworks

VLIR-UOS **Country Reference Frameworks** (CRF) support teams of academics when identifying and formulating project proposals, by providing a context analysis focused on Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development and the higher education sector in a given country, and by providing an overview of Belgian development actors, their ongoing projects and partners in that country in view of exploration of opportunities for synergy and complementarity within the Joint Strategic Framework of Belgian NonGovernmental Actors active in South Africa. On the other hand Belgian HE and Science actors joined in a thematic Joint Strategic Framework (JSF) on HES4SD.

The country reference frameworks consist of three components: (i) overview of VLIR-UOS projects in the country; (ii) context analysis focused on the Agenda 2030 framework and the higher education sector; (iii) overview of Belgian development actors (ANGCs involved in thematic or geographic JSFs & Enabel), their local partners and their regional/thematic focus

More information:

vliruos.be/southafrica

| Total budget South-Africa 2003-2021 (in €) | |
|--|---------------------|
| Projects | € 21.030.669 |
| Individual scholars | € 3.173.534 |
| Total | € 24.204.203 |

| Scholars from South-Africa in the context of VLIR-UOS cooperation (2003-2020) | |
|---|------------|
| PhD* | 70 |
| Short Term* | 37 |
| Study/Master* | 34 |
| Total | 141 |

* Except for PhD, only individual scholarships (outside projects) are shown. The number of finalised PhDs is approximate.



In addition to South-African scholars coming to Belgium, 1.069 Belgian scholars were granted a travel grant (short term) to South-Africa and another 5 students were granted a sandwich Ph.D. scholarship. More information on the scholarships of VLIR-UOS: www.vliruos.be/scholarships.

About VLIR-UOS

VLIR-UOS supports partnerships between universities and university colleges in Flanders (Belgium) and the South looking for innovative responses to global and local challenges.

VLIR-UOS funds cooperation projects between professors, researchers and teachers. VLIR-UOS also awards scholarships to students and professionals in Flanders and the South. Lastly, VLIR-UOS helps to strengthen higher education in the South and the globalisation of higher education in Flanders.

VLIR-UOS is part of the Flemish Interuniversity Council and receives funding from the Belgian Development Cooperation. www.vliruos.be

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