

2022 Business Plan

START International, Inc.

START VISION

We envision a more sustainable and equitable future through strengthening and connecting science with action.

START MISSION

We cultivate, inspire and connect emerging science leaders in Africa and Asia to work with societal partners in creating a more sustainable and equitable future.

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List of abbreviations

- AAS — African Academy of Sciences
- CASCADE — Cascading Climate and Health Risks in Cities
- CES — Circular and Ecological Sphere
- EPIC-N — Educational Partnerships for Innovation in Communities Network
- FRQ — Research Fund of Quebec
- GEWEX — Global Energy and Water Exchanges project
- GPEX — Global Precipitation Experiment
- GOFC-GOLD — Global Observation of Forest Cover and Land Change Dynamics
- IDRC — International Development Research Center
- IGES — Institute for Global Environmental Strategies
- LUCCC — Least Developed Countries University Coalition on Climate Change
- NASA — National Aeronautics and Space Administration
- ProGREEN — Promoting Gains in Renewable Energy
- RIfS — Regional Information for Society
- UNEP — United Nations Environment Programme
- USGCRP — United States Global Change Research Program
- WCRP — World Climate Research Program

Overview

This business plan describes priorities and actions for START in 2022 centered around the three focus areas of START's 5-year strategy, which encompasses the 2019-2024 period. Accordingly, this plan describes actions that START will undertake with Asian and African partners, and with global initiatives, to advance START's mission. It also describes START's financial status and operational priorities, and provides a summary of both progress and setbacks with respect to achieving the 2021 business plan.

1. Summary of progress towards achieving the 2021 Business Plan

Section 1 summarizes progress made in achieving the major priorities contained in the current (2021) business plan with respect to Asia and Africa as well as with global programs and partners. In 2021, the Covid pandemic continued to force restructuring of programmatic activities from in-person to virtual and START was able to adjust reasonably well in order to achieve most of its programmatic aims.

1.1 Asia: The four 2021 priorities in Asia were to advance: 1) the IGES Circulating and Ecological Sphere (CES) framework in Southeast Asia and South Asia; 2) the EPIC model in the Asia-Pacific region; 3) climate science in Central Asia in collaboration with GEWEX-WCRP; and 4) capacity development for Big Earth Data under the Digital Belt and Road initiative. Substantive progress was made on the first three objectives (through virtual meetings and workshops). Objective 4 did not advance and is not likely to in the near-term given current US-China relations.

1.2 Africa: The four 2021 priorities in Africa were to: 1) complete legacy (small, follow-on) projects from the 5-year ASSAR and FRACTAL projects; 2) advance renewable energy work in Francophone West Africa; 3) expand the science-leadership effort; and 4) implement a new project on climate change and health (CASCADE) and implement a project for continuation of EPIC work in Africa and Asia. Objective 1 has been completed, objective 2 has advanced significantly, objective 3 is slowly and steadily advancing, and objective 4 has not been achieved due to delays in securing funds. In the case of the last objective, we have received informal notification of proposal acceptance in both cases but funds have not been allocated.

1.3 Global: START's one global program (NASA's GOF-C-GOLD) convened a series of 8 virtual regional-network meetings in 2021.

2. Key priorities for START in 2022:

- Develop a successful proposal for USGCRP core funding for the 2023-2025 period.

- Develop areas of collaboration with Future Earth and WCRP that increase START’s visibility and that demonstrate our commitment to USGCRP priorities for collaboration between the three international programs.
- Leverage the new UNEP-LUCCC project to reinvigorate START’s efforts to work with southern universities.
- Promote stronger links between cities and universities through the partnership with EPIC in Africa and Asia, and continue to increase visibility in Asia through the partnership with IGES.
- Build on science leadership efforts, through engagement with Reos partners and with Future Earth, and to field test leadership approaches through the ProGREEN project.

3. Relevance of the 2022 Business Plan to the 5-year strategy period

As described in its five-year strategy, START will dedicate itself to the following three focus areas: 1) developing capacities to address critical global change and sustainability challenges; 2) strengthening scientific leadership through experiential learning; and 3) advancing regional priorities in science capacity development. Box 1 provides a list of those focus areas. The bulk of the 2022 work will be in Focus Area 1, as indicated in Figure 1.

Box 1. Focus areas in START’s 2019-2024 strategy

Focus Area 1: Developing capacities to address critical global change and sustainability challenges

- 1.1 Strengthen capacities for transdisciplinary research
- 1.2 Promote innovation in higher education
- 1.3 Expand opportunities for science communications
- 1.4 Bolster links between global change data and decision making

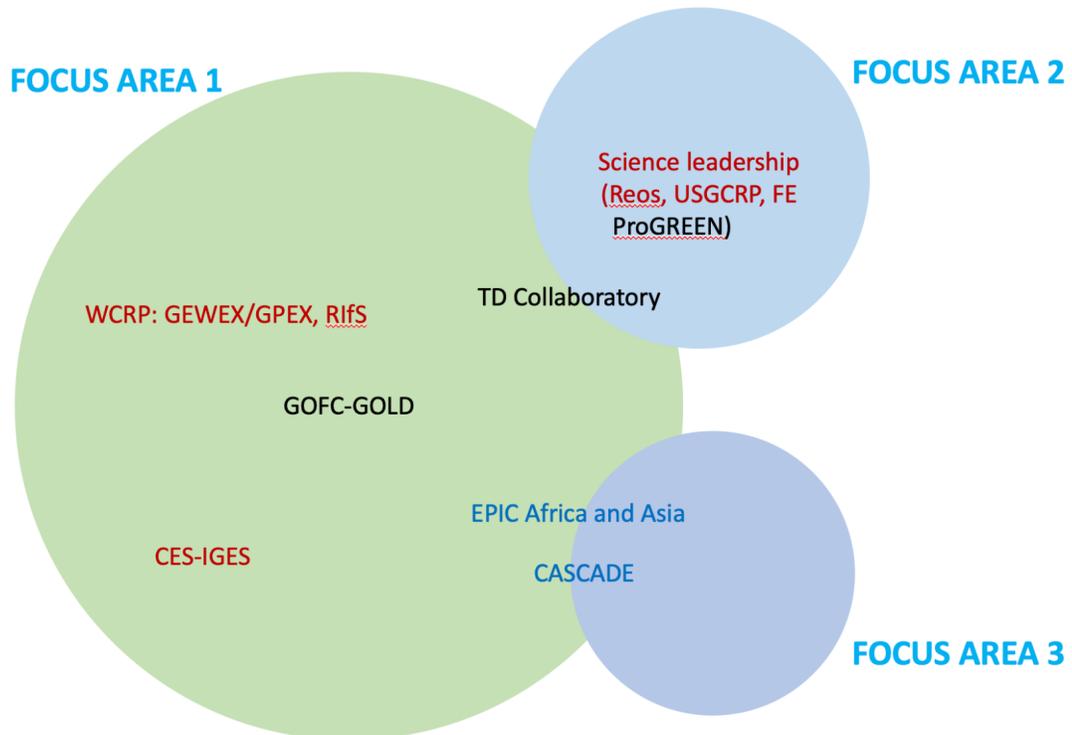
Focus Area 2: Strengthening scientific leadership through experiential learning

- 2.1 Promote cohort-based learning
- 2.2 Develop a leadership program for women in science

Focus Area 3: Advancing regional priorities in science capacity development

- 3.1 Amplify perspectives from the global south for advancing regionally driven science capacity development agendas

Figure 1. Distribution of 2022 activities across the three focus areas. Items in black text are funded, items for which proposals are under review are in blue text, and items in red text are under development.



4. Programmatic priorities in 2022

4.1 Further align with USGCRP priorities and seek continued core support

Beginning in the first quarter of 2022, START will develop a new proposal for renewal of core funding to cover the 2023-2026 period. The USGCRP is transitioning all three of its international programs (START, Future Earth and WCRP) onto the same project cycle period in order to ensure closer alignment of activities between the three programs. (Traditionally, the three programs' funding cycles were out of sync.) In addition to describing its distinct organizational priorities, START's core proposal is expected to propose activities, or at least describe potential new areas of collaboration with WCRP and Future Earth. Based on recent joining discussions with USGCRP, Future Earth and WCRP, these areas are expected to include:

- Co-creating a science leadership program with Future Earth and WCRP, possibly targeting the [WCRP Academy](#) as a focal point on which to develop a science leaders program.
- Exploring joint efforts with Future Earth on capacity development for transdisciplinary research.

- Developing a joint effort in Africa with WCRP on the proposed Global Precipitation Experiment (GPEX), which a US government priority, that would also serve as a pilot action on the WCRP Regional Information for Society (RifS) project
- Continuing to advance the climate science in Central Asia effort with WCRP-GEWEX

4.2 Re-engage with southern universities

Beginning in the first quarter of 2022, START and UNEP, with GEF support, will launch a 2-year project on building capacities of 15 LDC universities to design adaptation projects and advise their governments on how to more effectively access climate finance. Because START has a long history of engaging southern universities (but haven't had projects to systematically do so in the last few years), we view the LDC project as a good opportunity to increase START's visibility through engaging the LDC network with other climate-university networks. The aims of such engagement would be to increase connectivity of LDC countries to relevant networks, and planting the seeds for greater impact beyond the two-year UNEP grant. Prospective networks could include the UN Climate Change and Universities Partnership Program, the Global Alliance of Universities on Climate, and the International Universities Climate Alliance.

4.3 Promote stronger links between cities and universities

In 2022, START plans to further build on its partnership with EPIC (pending funding) in Africa and Asia to promote collaborations between local universities and local governments, and will continue to increase its visibility in Asia through the partnership with IGES on the CES framework. Lastly, significant expansion of work in Africa is possible if funding comes through for the CASCADE project. All of these activities will serve to further advance START's long-term effort to engage with universities on urban adaptation and resilience.

4.4 Promote science leadership

In 2022, START plans to build on its science leadership training efforts through its continued engagement with Reos Partners on developing web-based (asynchronous and synchronous) modules on leadership. This material was tested on an IDRC-funded project in Mali in 2021 and will figure prominently in the 2nd phase of the ProGreen project through its Renewable Energy Leadership Fellows program.

4.5 Advance global connections

4.5.1 GOFC-GOLD: In 2022, START will continue to work with the GOFC-GOLD regional network leads to convene virtual network meetings, consistent with its role as coordinator for activities across the GOFC-GOLD networks. The anticipated lessening of Covid-related travel restrictions is expected to result in a shift away from fully virtual events in favor of hybrid events. The long-term sustainability of the GOFC-GOLD program is uncertain because the

European Space Agency is no longer contributing to the program, which has shifted more of a funding burden onto NASA.

4.5.2 TD Collaboratory: In 2022, START will participate in the global project, Transdisciplinary Training Collaboratory: Building Common Ground. The project is intended to identify the knowledge and approaches that researchers and practitioners engaging in transdisciplinary research need to know to be effective, and to develop training materials that are credible and useful for imparting this information to as broad an audience as possible. Project goals include:

- Integrate existing knowledge on the key concepts, competencies, definitions, and accepted phases of transdisciplinary research,
- Develop and test workshop designs in our respective regions
- Create a design guide for trainers to be shared as widely as possible, e.g., within our universities, professional organizations, and networks.

4.5.3 Engagement with global initiatives and multilateral institutions

In 2022, START will continue its efforts to gain greater visibility in global platforms and initiatives. This will include:

- Continuing to build on a renewed partnership with UNEP that began in 2020.
- Continuing to build on a renewed partnership with WCRP that began in 2020.
- Maintaining strong involvement in the Belmont Forum, particularly as an advocate of Belmont efforts in the global south, as well as continuing to advance transdisciplinary training efforts in support of Belmont Forum Collaborative Research Actions.
- Identifying opportunities for further engagement with Future Earth’s science communities through shared priorities with its global research projects and regional centers.

All of these actions align with Focus Area 3, which relates to bringing regional priorities and perspectives to major global change initiatives. This is not an exhaustive list of global initiatives and partners, and START welcomes the opportunity to work with Board members to identify other entry points that align with START’s mission and 5-year strategy.

Table 1. Summary of 2022 programmatic priorities

Item	Strategic focus areas	Partnerships	Funding picture
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4.1: Alignment with USGCRP priorities	Focus Areas 1 and 2	Future Earth and WCRP	Demonstrating a concerted effort to collaborate is essential to ensuring continued core support. Solid collaborations might yield new funding opportunities if there is alignment with US government agencies, such as NASA in the case of WCRP.
4.2: Re-engage with southern universities	Focus Areas 1 and 3	UNEP, LUCCC, and prospective clim-univ networks	Funding secure for the two-year project. Active engagement with other networks will be important for trying to expand this effort beyond the project timeline.
4.3: Promote stronger links between universities and cities	Focus Area 1	IGES (CES), EPIC	Funding will be sought through the APN for growing the CES effort. Funding is <i>still</i> pending from NSF to support a two-year effort to further consolidate EPIC programs in Africa and Asia.
4.4: Promote science leadership	Focus Area 2	Reos Partners	Funding available (through FRQ's ProGreen project) for testing the modules in an active project and to further develop 1-2 modules.
4.5.1: GOFC-GOLD	Focus Area 1	NASA	Programmatic funding secured for 2022 and 2023 but staff-cost funding may run out in 2022.
4.5.2: TD Collaboratory	Focus Area 1	NSF, University of Colorado, Stanford University, Global Organizations	Funding only available for staff travel to training events.
4.5.3: Engagement with global initiatives	Focus Areas 1, 2, and 3	UNEP, WCRP, Belmont Forum, Future Earth	No funding but START provides an important service function to these initiatives.

5. START's funding profile, 2022

5.1 Overview

START's funding situation is concerning, given a reduction in the level of core support and rate of new revenue streams stemming from a tight funding environment in the wake of the Covid pandemic. Covid relief grants and employee retention credits funded 35% of total salaries offsetting the decline in programmatic expenditures in 2021. Minimizing operational expenses has slightly mitigated the underlying financial stress but new funding sources are required to substantially improve the situation. Over the past few years, START has taken measures to reduce its operational and overhead expenses and, with the recently reduced core grant level, we have now cut to the point where future additional cost savings would likely not be possible. START staff are working very diligently to generate new funding sources that will include more salary coverage, travel support, communications support, and fuller indirect rates (where funders

allow). It is important to note that START has consistently added to its reserve funds in 2020 and 2021 despite these challenges. It is projected to be the case in 2022 as well.

5.2 Core support

Core support is an ongoing concern following a lower-than-expected award level from USGCRP in the current grant cycle (2019-2022). The annual funding levels requested by START from the USGCRP can no longer cover all of START's core funding needs (including funds for travel and program communications). When START's annual requests are met with reduced levels, that gap grows and must be met through continued proposal development for activities that generate additional staff support and contribute indirect funds to the organization's G&A (General & Administrative) cost pool. The reduction in core support affects not only staff salary support but also funds for travel, organizational communications, and consumables. Beginning in early 2022, START will develop a new core proposal for the 2023-2026 period. The USGCRP has clearly stated their desire to see greater collaboration between the three programs they fund from the international budget (START, WCRP and Future Earth), as described in section 4.1 above.

5.3 Other income sources

In addition to START's core support, other funding sources in 2021 were NASA (GOFCC-GOLD), FRQ (ProGreen), UNEP (EPIC Asia), AAS (science leadership) and IDRC (ASSAR legacy grants). Looking forward, NASA and FRQ support will continue and new UNEP support will come through the GEF-LUCCC grant. However, these income sources provide only modest staff support and indirect cost recovery, pointing to the need for more efforts towards partnership building and new income sources. Moving forward, it will be critical to engage the current Board members in exploring additional funding prospects that align with the three focus areas of START's 5-year strategy, and to identify prospective future Board members who would be willing to work with START leadership in developing new funding opportunities. Looking forward, one area of potential exploration between START and Board members relates to commitments made by northern countries at COP26 to assist southern regions to adapt to climate change.

5.4 Operational expenses

Cuts in operational expenses implemented in 2020 and 2021, including transitioning to a less expensive payroll management system, reducing our communications budget, changes to computer software and website design commitments, will continue into 2022. START's programmatic efficiency to G&A ratio is projected to improve significantly from a 75/25% ratio in 2021 to a 91/9% ratio in 2022. START's overall G&A expenditures will decrease from a projected \$244,576 in 2021 to \$137,693 in 2022. As a result, START will be operating with a surplus of an estimated \$77,813.

6. Operational priorities, 2022

6.1 Staffing priorities

START is secure for staff funding at current levels in 2022 as a result of Covid relief funding in 2020 and 2021 and new salary support provided by UNEP through the GEF-LUCCC grant. However, procuring new sources of programmatic and staff funding is of *paramount importance* to maintain a small and efficient secretariat to support our science capacity development efforts. We are not considering layoffs or reductions at this juncture but will revisit the option depending on the level of new funding streams that are anticipated to be awarded in 2022 and 2023.

START is committed to maintaining a strong regional presence by placing contracted staff in regionally based institutions. These arrangements significantly elevate START's visibility and improve the effectiveness of program implementation in the regions. Moreover, these staff are helping to identify potential regional partners with whom we can collaborate in developing new project opportunities. START currently has two African staff overseeing projects in West and Southern Africa. Their positions are technical in nature and thus the ability to retain continuity in regional staffing very much depends on new project funding.

6.2 Communications

In 2021, we made progress in producing attractive, informative and compelling products that will play a role in communicating START's core messages. Products include a printed and online [communications kit](#), newsletters, the ProSus magazine, STARTcast podcast, a consistent branded powerpoint presentation, and stories that feature START's impact. Unfortunately due to financial constraints, START does not have a dedicated budget to communications. Moving forward, we will seek funds for communications in future proposals to ensure we can maintain our communications footprint. Despite financial setbacks, START is committing substantial time to strengthen our online communications and presence as a result of Covid. For instance, we will continue to accelerate the production of several communications tools to have greater visibility and to provide virtual learning and connections in the digital space. START is also adapting program content and delivery through virtual facilitation and webinars. In 2022, we are committed to developing three distinct online communication products: 1) critical aspects of science writing; 2) nuts and bolts of successful grant writing; 3) and core elements of science leadership.

6.3 Monitoring Evaluation and Learning

We strive to demonstrate START's capacities as a learning organization - one that creates space for self-reflection in order to continuously transform. To ensure that our strategic plan is forward looking and impactful, we have put into practice a monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) framework that was developed in 2020 and refined in 2021. The framework will be expanded in

2022 and implemented in addition to individual program MEL plans. The expanded MEL framework will examine the following themes:

- We promote connectivity
- We support knowledge integration that enables action
- We foster experiential learning and skill building
- We cultivate leadership in science
- We advance regional priorities in global change science