

Strategy to mitigate START's current financial challenges

Background: START's core funding, which it receives from the US government, through the US Global Change Research Program (USGCRP), has been essential to the organization's long-term viability. In October 2020, START was notified of the award level it will receive over the next three years (covering calendar years 2021-2023), which amounts to a 26-40% reduction in START's annual core funding relative to the annual level it received prior to 2020.

We had been informed by USGCRP to expect a reduction in core support, so while a budget cut was anticipated the amount of that reduction was greater than the range we had been told to expect. Moreover, these cuts in core support coincide with:

- the expiration of two large 5-year Africa projects and a postponement in the release of an RFP for an anticipated follow-up program,
- a reduction in the number of suitable calls during the Covid period,
- abeyance (because of Covid) of one current grant which has prevented us from drawing salary and indirect, and
- minimal fund generation during the leadership of START's previous executive director.

START is secure for staff funding for the next year *but* 2021 will be critical for bringing in new funded opportunities. The START senior management has developed a strategy for addressing the organization's precarious financial situation, for the Board's consideration. We propose the following set of actions:

- Continue building strategic partnerships and, together, developing concepts and pursuing funding opportunities. Table 1 below shows a large number of possibilities. *However*, going from concept stage to actually generating funds is a long and uncertain process, and the staff funding levels of the table-1 items are modest. On the other hand, these items are well aligned with START's strategic priorities.
- Continue monitoring for funding calls, and step up that process to ensure that we are not missing any calls for which we are qualified. During this Covid period, we have seen a significant decline in the number of RFPs related to capacity development for global environmental change.
- Engage Board members in helping START to identify potential funding sources (Table 2). Our priority here would be on opportunities that are *mutually beneficial* to Board member's organizational and strategic interests.
- Cut unnecessary overhead and general and administrative expenses. START was already quite lean before the reduction in core funding. We are instituting additional cuts (Table 3), which are generating only modest savings in the 2021 budget.

- Assess whether we are utilizing staff most effectively to meet our programmatic commitments, and where we can shift responsibilities around to optimize proposal development efforts. We are not presently contemplating staff layoffs or reductions from full to part time or salary reductions but those options will be on the table as we move forward into 2021.

Table 1 describes proposals under submission, and actions underway with key partners to develop concepts and identify potential funding sources. Items in green highlight indicate proposals under review. The partnership and actions all relate to building new, or consolidating existing, partnerships consistent with START’s mission and 5-year strategic plan. The time commitment to develop concepts (the non-green items) is modest and is currently not distracting senior leadership from looking for other funding opportunities and other work commitments.

Partner(s)	Action(s)	Strategic fit & visibility	Funding prospect	Staff funding level Low = < \$25K /yr Medium = \$25-45K /yr High = > \$50 /yr
GEWEX/ World Climate Research Program	Develop partnership for Central Asia climate science effort. Proposals with NASA and the Volkswagen Foundation are under review	High	Medium	None to low, at least initially. Capacity development will be further downstream. (Partnership viewed favorably by USGCRP)
NSF/EPIC	Proposal under review. Would consolidate EPIC work in Africa and Asia	High	Medium	Low
Univ. Cape Town and 4 other Afr. universities	‘CASCADE’ Proposal under review at African Academy of Sciences. High profile program and strong partners	High	Medium	Medium
TH-Koln-ITT Univ. Ghana	Proposal under review but UNEP-GEF program in South Sudan in which the proposal is based has been delayed indefinitely	High	Low	Low (Proposal unlikely to be funded due to lack of action by recipient country)
Gender InSITE	Women in science: webinars to gather priorities from WiS practitioners & communities on which to develop concepts and proposals	High	Low	Low (Could improve assuming we gain momentum)

Reos, Wits Univ.	Transformational change leadership: concept note and outreach to begin gathering momentum	High	Low	Low (Could improve assuming we gain momentum)
Wetlands International West Africa	GEC education and training: concept note and outreach to begin gathering momentum	Medium to high	Low	Low (Trying to build new partnership in Francophone region)
African Academy of Sciences	Explore opportunities to expand START's current science leadership training program with AAS to their other fellowship programs	High	Medium	Low (This would build onto an existing program and further cement partnership)
Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (Japan)	Continue developing program; secure APN funding; look for larger funding sources as the program grows	High	Medium	None to low (This is an important partnership and we have good prospects for APN funding. Assuming the program grows further, then increased potential for staff support)
Thriving Earth Exchange	Community science effort in Asia: concept note and outreach with regional partners	Medium to high	Medium	Low (This is an American Geophysical Union program and they are resourced to help look for funding)

Table 2 describes *proposed* potential points of engagement with START's Board on developing collaborations with Board members' organizations and/or strategic priorities. We are proposing these actions in the spirit of their being mutually beneficial to START and Board members and with the expectation of working together to identify potential funders and to co-develop proposals.

Action with Board member	Description	Actions we would undertake
Developing a Women in Science initiative (Roseanne)	Explore with Roseanne possibilities for collaborative actions.	Contact Remi to discuss an event or project in West Africa. Explore synergies with other funding agencies.
Explore potential for a collaboration with Ouranos in Francophone West Africa or elsewhere (Alain)	Can Ouranos and START explore mutual areas of interest in Francophone Africa?	Begin an exploration with Alain. If favorable, co-develop proposals.

Potential to offer capacity development activities or connect GOFC more widely in GEO (Barb)	Expanding reach and relevance of GOFC program. Explore opportunities for capacity development within GEO.	Seek Barb's advice
Potential to pick up the water security-Africa concept that was developed in 2019 but then went quiet (Lars)	START, UG, ITT-TH/K, Future Earth water program	Explore this further with Lars. If favorable, co-develop proposals.
Connecting R-CES concept to work in Ghana through START and IGES long-term partnerships with Univ Ghana (Kazuhiko)	Develop an R-CES concept in Ghana	Explore this further with Prof. Takeuchi and with Univ. Ghana faculty. If favorable, co-develop proposals.

Table 3 describes cost-cutting measures that are under consideration. We are prioritizing cuts in general and administrative functions including communications and fringe benefits so as to avoid laying off staff or reducing staff hours. Staff are fully engaged in programmatic activities and have the institutional memory needed to effectively complete the tasks. We are not considering layoffs or reductions at this juncture but will revisit this in 2021 depending on the level of new funding flows.

Item	Action(s)	Implications (+/-)
Payroll management	Transfer payroll from ADP to Quickbooks. Purchase a time tracking software to supplement.	Save ~ \$5K per year by reducing payroll fees Spend \$600 on time tracking software
Communications contract	Budget only 7K for communications specialist in 2021. Internal staff will need to manage day to day communications (website, newsletters, basic designs, etc.).	Save ~20K
Fringe benefits	Reduce our annual employer 403b retirement contribution from 8% to to the minimum requirement of 4.5%.	The 4.5% offering reduces our cost by ~ 11K.
Staffing	Examine all staff portfolios to reprioritize, where possible, towards fund raising and to see where future staff cuts may be needed.	No savings. We will closely examine staffing in 2021 to make decisions about 2022.
General G&A services	Payroll management and our communications contract are the two largest G&A cost reductions. In addition, small cuts have been made including: computer software, Davinci virtual office, and website	Save ~15K

	design projects. START will review international travel insurance and corporate liability policies during our upcoming renewal period in May 2021 to further reduce costs if possible.	
Travel	When travel resumes in the post-Covid period, we will be extremely selective on prioritizing travel, as any non-grant travel will draw on our unrestricted net assets. We will also put more travel support into grants we write and where we are invited to participate.	Less flexibility in travel for partnership development though the newly discovered potential of virtual meetings (during Covid) will offset some of that.