

# **Analysis of START’s operating space in an increasingly crowded landscape of actors and initiatives**

## ***Overview***

This landscape analysis is intended to advance the Board’s understanding of what is unique in START’s offerings and how the broader landscape of actors and initiatives influences our ability to remain impactful. This analysis provides context for the evolving landscape, describes START’s current operating space and partnerships, identifies other key programs and initiatives that intersect with that operating space, and identifies important vulnerabilities as well as strengths in this difficult funding environment. One of the key takeaways of this analysis is that while START remains relevant and impactful, it is facing systemic challenges related to core funding, and a tight funding landscape more generally, combined with an increasingly crowded landscape of capacity development initiatives. Through this analysis, it is hoped that the Board and staff can work more coherently together to determine priorities for partnership building, strategic communications, and program development.

## **List of abbreviations**

AAS — African Academy of Sciences

ACDI — African Climate and Development Initiative

CDKN/SSN — Climate and Development Knowledge Network/South-South-North

CIRCLE — Climate Impact Research Capacity and Leadership Enhancement

CNRD — Centers for Natural Resources and Development

DBAR/CAS — Digital Belt and Road/Chinese Academy of Sciences

FRQ — Research Fund of Quebec

IDRC — International Development Research Centre

ICLEI — Local Governments for Sustainability

IGES — Institute for Global Environmental Strategies

ISC — International Science Council

TEA-START — Temperate East Asia regional office for START

USGCRP — United States Global Change Research Program

WASCAL — West African Science Service Centre on Climate Change and Adapted Land Use

WCRP — World Climate Research Program

### **1. Context for START's landscape analysis**

There are two key considerations that shape START's positioning in the landscape. The first consideration being that development assistance agencies are increasingly moving towards large consortium bids — a situation in which START finds itself as one among many partners and where capacity development activities are generally under-resourced. This shift has, in recent situations, somewhat constrained START's ability to offer innovative capacity development activities.

The second consideration concerns the rise in the number of organizations that offer capacity development related to working at the interface of research and policy/practice and targeting of early career researchers. While this is a welcome development with respect to achieving stronger capacity development outcomes in the aggregate, it underscores the need for START to work even harder to remain differentiated and competitive. Also of concern to START is the rise of network building initiatives that are well connected to donor pipelines and that contain internal capacity building units, as well as the entry of professional consultancy firms into the adaptation space with their ability to contract out capacity development services.

### **2. START's operating space**

START's operating space is situated in the realm of science capacity development for addressing global environmental change challenges in Africa and Asia. START is firmly anchored in the science end of capacity development, we have long-term partnerships in Africa and Asia and are viewed as an “honest broker” in these regions, our alumni are an important resource (but one that remains underutilized), and we have historic ties to and credibility with large global initiatives and programs like the World Climate Research Program, the core projects of Future Earth, the International Science Council, the Belmont Forum, and UN agencies. We are a lean and flexible organization with the ability to do things quickly and efficiently, which funders have noted with appreciation.

We provide science capacity development through a combination of strengthening skills, expanding knowledge and promoting connectivity, and we strive to integrate disciplines and science/policy/practice domains in our program design. Our efforts primarily target early career scientists and, where possible, early career non-research professionals who work at science-policy/practice interfaces. START's operating space is circumscribed by our historic commitment to early career professionals in Africa and Asia, our GEC-science capacity development mission, and our profile of key strategic partnerships (described in section 3 below).

START achieves impact through offering:

- a wide array of capacity development modalities, spanning technical training, science communications, science-policy engagement, etc.;
- opportunities that bring together diverse knowledge and perspectives (from within and outside of the research realm), which builds transversal skills and increases capacity development impact;
- a boundary organization - "bridge builder/connector" function that provides opportunities that link regional to global research communities;
- a large community of partners and alumni in Africa and Asia that serve as a resource for developing new programs that further grow START's impact; and,
- a catalytic function through providing seed or starter funding to early career researchers who then go on to obtain other opportunities and larger funding.

### ***3. START's key strategic partners and START's role in and value to them***

Universities: The number of universities with which START directly engages varies with the type of program<sup>1</sup>. The University of Ghana and the University of Cape Town are long-standing START regional affiliates and are the most consistently active. Thammasat University in Bangkok is a pending regional affiliate for Southeast Asia<sup>2</sup>, and one that we have worked with on and off since 2011. Our role and value to the regional affiliates is as an international partner who can bring our capacity development experience to the collaboration, and working with them to develop collaboration and find funding.

There are a number of other universities with which we have a history of engagement (e.g. Witwatersrand, Stellenbosch, Makerere, etc.) and university initiatives (i.e. WASCAL in West Africa) where we maintain strong personal contacts but have no current or recent programmatic engagement. Goodwill exists with these universities to go after funding if and when opportunities arise. We continuously look for opportunities to forge mutually beneficial collaborations with other universities so that we can further diversify our partnership profile.

Research centers/Academies/Think tanks: We have current collaborations with IGES, CAS/DBAR (through TEA-START), AAS, and Reos Partners. In each case, START brings

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the African Climate Change Fellowship program (2007-2013) engaged over 20 universities; the FRACTAL program (2014-2019) engaged over 10 universities.

<sup>2</sup> Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok is START's SE Asia Regional Center but has suffered in recent years from lack of funding and lack of vision. We are increasing our engagement with Thammasat University, which has a more comprehensive approach to resilience and sustainability.

expertise in capacity development to the partnership. We are presently engaged with all of these entities, with IGES and AAS being the most active.

NGOs: Currently our main NGO partners are ICLEI, Oxfam, Wetlands International Africa, Manila Observatory, Oscar M. Lopez Center, Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment, Sustainable Environment and Ecological Development Society, the Educational Partnerships for Innovation in Communities, and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Center. Our role is to bring capacity development, and a greater role of science, into common areas of interest, and to collaboratively develop proposals.

Multilateral organizations/initiatives: UNEP, Belmont Forum, Future Earth, WCRP, and ISC are current partners. START is seen as valuable for its capacity development and coordination expertise and its regional connections and presence. Currently, the highest potential for an activities-based partnership exists with UNEP and WCRP, and we continue to pursue opportunities to work with Future Earth. We are a formal partner to the Belmont Forum and are eligible to receive funds specifically earmarked for capacity development but are not eligible to be a partner on their calls for proposals.

US national funders: Our core funder is the USGCRP, and we currently have grants from NSF (pending) and NASA (in hand). START's role in USGCRP is to fulfill USGCRP's international mandate and to serve as a resource for linking US scientists and USGCRP priorities with African and Asian partners. Core funding from USGCRP has decreased over the last several years and, with the current core grant period, significantly so. This situation points to the need to diversify our funding profile while at the same time continuing to maintain strong relations with our core funder.

Science-development funders: FRQ, DFID, IDRC, and USAID. We have an active relationship with FRQ and IDRC; none, presently, with USAID and DFID but with a long history of engagement.

#### ***4. Programs and initiatives with similar offerings***

While not comprehensive, the entries in the table below offer a representative cross-section of programs and initiatives that share a common emphasis on capacity development. This list is slanted towards Africa, more analysis is needed in the case of Asia.

<b>Program/initiative &amp; type</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Past START engagement</b>
SouthSouthNorth & the Climate Development and Knowledge Network (SSN/CDKN) <i>Regional non-profit organization</i>	Supports national and regional responses to climate change through policy and knowledge development, enhancing capability and mobilizing resources to respond to climate change challenges.	Ran a South Asia science grants program with them in 2014-15 and an Africa grants program in 2011-2012.
African Climate and Development Network (ACDI) <i>Regional research and educational organization</i>	Strategic initiative, to “facilitate and substantially extend climate change research and education at University of Cape Town with the specific context of addressing the development challenges of Africa from an African perspective”.	ACDI was the PI on the ASSAR project between 2014-2019.
Centers for Natural Resources and Development (CNRD) <i>International research and educational organization</i>	A global network of higher education institutions promoting academic exchange and cooperation in the area of natural resources management, in particular related to water, land, ecosystem, and renewable energy resources.	None. Though Lars Ribbe (CNRD’s Director) is currently on START’s Board.
The Climate Impact Research Capacity and Leadership Enhancement <i>Regional science granting and science academy organization</i>	The CIRCLE program aims to develop the skills and research results for early career African researchers in the field of climate change. Last round was offered in 2017; does not appear to be currently active.	None, though attempts have been made. The CIRCLE program was modeled after START’s African Climate Change Fellowship Program
International Foundation for Science (IFS) <i>International science granting organization</i>	IFS offers research grants to early career researchers in Sub Saharan Africa, Latin America and Caribbean, Asia and Pacific, Middle East and North Africa to conduct research in social and biophysical sciences.	None, though several discussions between respective directors over the years.
The World Academy for Sciences (TWAS) <i>International science granting and science academy organization</i>	TWAS offers postgraduate fellowships and research grants for researchers from the south to travel and study at host institutions in southern and northern countries. It also offers capacity developing activities, travel grants, short courses, etc.	Significant, though several years ago (early 2000s). Former head of TWAS was on START’s Board up until 2015.
International Science Council (ISC) <i>International science granting and science academy organization</i>	ISC has a global reach, offering advocacy for science-for-policy and policy for science efforts. ISC works with early career researchers in capacity development and transdisciplinary research. ISC’s southern regional offices (Africa, Asia, Latin America) face financial and operational uncertainty with the merger of ICSU and ISSC into ISC.	Significant, with ISC’s precursors, ICSU and ISSC. Head of ISC on START’s Board up until 2015.

## **5. *Strengths and vulnerabilities (and aspirations) for START in its current operating environment***

### *Strengths*

- START enjoys a long-standing reputation for excellence in science capacity development in Africa and Asia, and is viewed by its regionally based partners as a committed ally and honest broker who promotes the needs and priorities of the region.
- START has a strong reputation and visibility within the sphere of global sustainability frameworks (exemplified by its partnerships with the Belmont Forum, WCRP, IPCC, Future Earth, ISC, etc.)
- START continues to innovate in its program design through promoting transdisciplinary approaches to learning and investing greater effort towards nurturing emergent science-leadership qualities by its program recipients.

### *Vulnerabilities*

- Core funding levels have been reduced significantly in our new (annual years 2021-2023) core grant. This is after a long period of slightly declining core funding. This factor, combined with the lack of flexible funding to seed potential new programs, constrains our ability to maintain our current impact.
- Increase in the number and reach of other capacity development organizations and initiatives, combined with the tight funding landscape, makes it more difficult to stand out but it also compels us to be smarter and more strategic in how we engage with partners. We are being proactive in our outreach.
- Small service-orientated (administrative and logistical) functions that START provides to some of our funders and partners brings in minor income streams that help meet financial needs but it also undermines our ability to be visible and impactful, given the large workload-to-staff ratio at START.

### *Aspirations*

- START will continue to leverage its long-term partnerships to pursue opportunities for creative and innovative programming (examples: GenderInSITE and Reos Partners) as a counterweight to parts of its portfolio that are administratively-focused service delivery functions.
- Because of its link to global frameworks, START has an opportunity to work both with downstream capacity development as well as upstream capacity development, and to broker the relationships between the two, which speaks to Action Area 3 of START's 5-year strategy for an influencing and advocacy role with respect to regional needs and priorities. However, these kinds of activities generally do not bring in new funding.
- START will continue to leverage the strength of its program alumni to tell its story better and to find opportunities to re-engage alumni in new efforts.