

# The Cost of Dysfunction: How Inefficient Administrative Communication and Coordination Among International Funders Undermine Research Partnerships

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## Introduction

At their best, research partnerships leverage complementary strengths to advance science and shared development goals through equitable collaboration. In reality, North–South partnerships are frequently undermined by structural inequalities and power imbalances, often reinforced by research funding arrangements. Poor coordination between international funders leads to misaligned timelines, conflicting reporting requirements, and fragmented administrative processes, increasing transaction costs and delaying implementation. These inefficiencies disproportionately burden partners in low- and middle-income countries and divert researchers from scientific work. This poster examines four North–South funded partnerships involving Stellenbosch University, analysing how funding and administrative systems shape equity, implementation, and researcher experience.

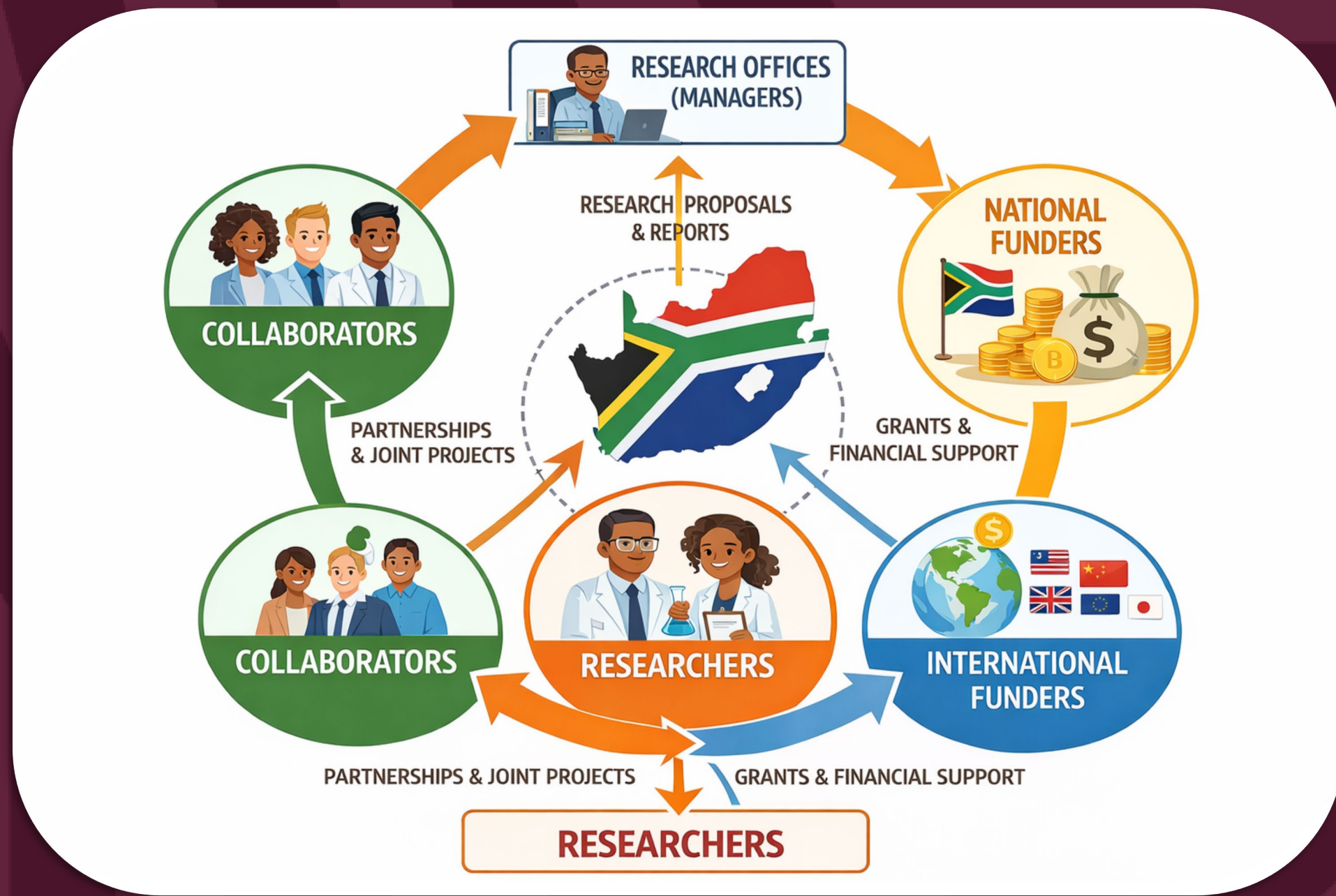


Figure 1:  
Diagram of the  
South African  
Research  
Funding  
Ecosystem

## Contrasting Funding Architectures and Power Dynamics in the four North–South Research Partnerships

Three of the funding instruments in this poster illustrate how differing bilateral and multilateral funding architectures shape power dynamics, administrative complexity, and equity in international research partnerships. The NRF/NSF Dimensions of Biodiversity programme (South Africa–USA) highlights pronounced funding asymmetries, with NSF contributions vastly exceeding NRF allocations across both three- and five-year projects, raising questions about agenda-setting and balance in collaboration. The NRF–NWO Water–Energy–Food Nexus call (South Africa–Netherlands and multiple African partners) demonstrates the added complexity of multilateral funding, where harmonisation is limited: partners face divergent funding levels, currencies, timelines, and national requirements despite working within a single consortium. In contrast, the NRF/DFG International Research Training Groups (IRTGs) partnership (South Africa–Germany) reflects a more structured, long-term model centred on capacity development through joint PhD training, but still embeds asymmetries through parallel submission processes and nationally determined cost structures. Collectively, these cases reveal how misaligned funding scales, procedures, and expectations influence collaboration experiences in North–South research partnerships. The fourth funding instrument is an institutional partnership between Stellenbosch University and TU Dresden (Germany), illustrating a well-aligned administrative model for North–South collaboration. Funding processes between the two institutions are coordinated, particularly for staff mobility, which is jointly planned and administered through the respective international offices. While project-specific research funding must still be sourced separately by each partner, the alignment and cooperation in managing mobility funds demonstrate a more equitable and efficient approach to administering international research partnerships.

## Experiences of four researchers at Stellenbosch University on North–South research partnerships in funded research projects

### Case A: NSF–NRF (USA–SA)

- Case focus: South Africa–USA research partnership funded through a joint NSF–NRF call
- Strong collaboration: Scientific partnership and proposal development largely successful.
- Application hurdles: Late calls, mismatched platforms, and divergent funder rules created high administrative pressure
- Implementation strain: Delayed funds, missing student support, and South Africa covering most fieldwork costs.

**Takeaway: Funding and admin inefficiencies limit equity and recognition despite strong research outputs**

**Key Argument**  
Inefficient coordination between international funders—rather than weak scientific collaboration—drives administrative burden, delays, and inequity in North–South research partnerships, disproportionately affecting Global South partners.

### Case B: NRF–NWO (NL–Africa)

- Case focus: South Africa–Netherlands bilateral research partnership between Stellenbosch University and Utrecht University
- Established collaboration: South Africa–Netherlands partnership built on long-standing institutional ties; joint proposal development was positive and constructive.
- Implementation challenges: Administrative and systemic issues arose during project rollout, delaying research activities.
- Timing and operational issues: Misaligned funding cycles, intake timelines, technical platform problems, and PI changes slowed PhD and postdoc recruitment.

**Takeaway: Systemic misalignment—not lack of support—is the main barrier, underscoring the need for better coordination across funding,**

### Case C NRF–DFG (Germany–SA)

- Case focus: Long-standing South Africa–Germany research partnership involving multiple South African universities and a German research consortium
- Established Collaboration: Long-standing South Africa–Germany research partnership involving multiple South African universities and a German research consortium with a streamlined approval process
- Implementation challenges: Significant administrative and structural barriers emerged during project execution. Delays in communication and fund disbursement, compounded by platform transitions and multi-institutional fund flows for the SA team.
- Equity impacts: South African doctoral students faced prolonged funding delays and more limited resource access than German counterparts
- Effects on researchers: Disruptions to research timelines, negatively affecting progress and morale
- Outcomes: Strong scientific outputs and training achievements despite administrative inefficiencies

**Takeaway: Structural and administrative misalignment strained partnership equity and discouraged continuation, highlighting the need for aligned funding systems, clearer communication, and coordinated funder processes**

### Case D: A Counterfactual: What Alignment Looks Like: SU–TU Dresden

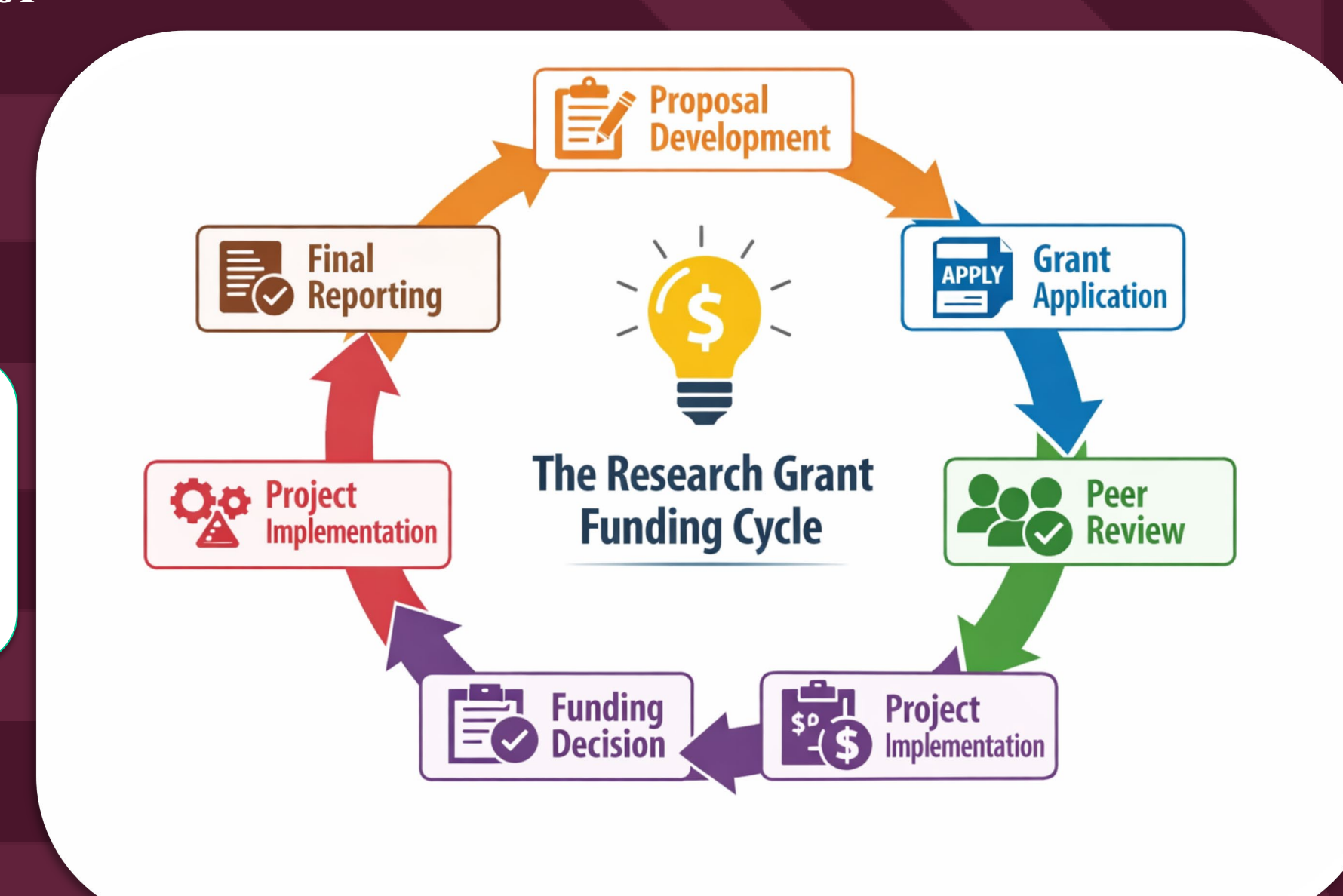
- Case focus: North–North/South research partnership between Stellenbosch University and TU Dresden
- Administrative efficiency: Erasmus+ processes described as highly efficient and well aligned
- Operational strengths: Clear communication, rapid onboarding, reliable fund disbursement, and low administrative burden
- Research benefits: Enables focus on research outputs, skills transfer, and international exposure
- Partnership outcomes: Equitable collaboration, strong student development, and sustained research productivity

**Takeaway: Efficient, well-aligned institutional agreements enable successful collaboration without the administrative burden of joint research funding, allowing partners to secure research funding independently while sustaining mobility. Clear communication, predictable funding, and low administrative complexity strengthen trust, support skills transfer and student development, and promote equitable, productive research partnerships.**

## Conclusion

Across the four cases, international research partnerships were marked by strong scientific collaboration but divergent administrative experiences that shaped equity and sustainability. The South Africa–USA, South Africa–Netherlands, and South Africa–Germany cases reveal recurring post-award challenges, including misaligned funding timelines, delayed disbursement of South African funds, platform inefficiencies, and limited support for administrative or staff time. These constraints disproportionately affected South African partners, strained project workflows, and, in some cases, discouraged future collaboration despite high research productivity. In contrast, the Erasmus+–enabled South Africa–Germany partnership demonstrates how clear administrative design can enable equitable collaboration: separate funding streams, efficient processes, predictable disbursement, and minimal bureaucratic burden allowed researchers and students to focus on mobility, skills transfer, and research outputs. Taken together, the cases suggest that administrative system design—rather than partnership quality—is the critical determinant of equity, efficiency, and long-term success in international research collaborations.

Figure 2: Research Grants Funding Cycle



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## Further information

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