SCRS Research Continuity Grants for Africa

First pilot call under UNESCO's Science for Crisis Response and Solutions Programme

1. Background and rationale

Conflict and natural or biological hazards can interrupt fieldwork, damage laboratories, displace research teams, cut access to data and equipment, and leave promising studies unfinished. These losses weaken national capacity to understand risk, protect health and ecosystems, manage water and food systems, and support recovery.

These circumstances are acute in Africa. At the end of 2024, 38.8 million people were living in internal displacement in sub-Saharan Africa - around 46% of the global total - and every country in the region that recorded conflict displacement also recorded disaster displacement.[1] Research capacity also remains constrained: according to UIS, sub-Saharan Africa had about 91 researchers per million inhabitants in 2025,[2] while average R&D expenditure in Africa remains below the African Union target of 1% of GDP.[3]

UNESCO launched the Science for Crisis Response and Solutions (SCRS) Programme in 2026 to support the continuity, recovery and resilience of scientific systems. This first pilot call would turn that commitment into focused action for Global Priority Africa. Research-continuity grants would form one component of a broader SCRS vision that may, over time, encompass access to scientific infrastructure, international cooperation, temporary hosting and other research-continuity mechanisms,

2. Link to the Science Decade

The pilot responds to the first Global Conference of the International Decade of Sciences for Sustainable Development (2024-2033), which emphasized science-driven action, partnership, inclusion and resilience. It would contribute by:

- closing scientific gaps by enabling crisis-affected African researchers to remain active;
- strengthening inclusive and resilient scientific systems, with particular encouragement to women, young scientists, scientists from LDCs and African SIDS;
- translating commitment into action through small, timely support to complete interrupted research; and
- building partnerships and the nucleus of a future practitioner network able to advise SCRS and advocate for the continuity of science in crises.

3. Strategic objective

To preserve scientific capacities, facilitate scientific continuity and strengthen the resilience of scientific systems in crisis-affected African contexts by enabling scientists whose natural-science research was interrupted by conflict or a natural or biological hazard to resume or complete a clearly defined part of that research through a small institutional grant.

4. Why UNESCO?

UNESCO is well placed to lead this pilot through its mandate to strengthen scientific systems, foster international scientific cooperation and build long-term institutional capacities. Its links with Member States, national commissions, field offices, universities, research institutions and scientific networks can strengthen national research systems. The pilot would also allow UNESCO to gather evidence on practical barriers to research continuity and use the lessons to inform the future evolution of SCRS.

5. Proposed pilot-grant design

Feature	Proposed approach
Pilot status	First pilot call; implementation experience and lessons will inform the future development of SCRS.
Number and value	Six grants of USD 2,000 each; direct grant budget: USD 12,000.
Funding Model	Paid to the selected scientist's host university or research institute, subject to UNESCO's applicable rules.
Field	Natural sciences; interdisciplinary proposals are eligible where the principal research component is in the natural sciences.
Crisis link	Research interrupted by conflict or a natural or biological hazard within the previous three years or still affected by the consequences of such a crisis.
Duration	Up to six months, with a short final narrative and financial report.

6. Target beneficiaries and selection balance

The pilot call would be open to scientists of any African nationality who are based at a recognized university or research institute in Africa and hold at least a Master's degree or equivalent research qualification. Women scientists, scientists under 40, scientists from least developed countries and Small Island Developing States in Africa are strongly encouraged to apply.

- an intended award balance of three women and three men, subject to the quality and eligibility of applications;
- where feasible, three awards for research interrupted by conflict and three for research interrupted by natural or biological hazards;
- geographical balance across Western, Central, Eastern and Southern Africa, with North African applications also eligible; and
- priority to applicants with limited access to alternative funding and a realistic plan to restart or complete the interrupted work.

Applicants from Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe are encouraged to apply. This list is not exhaustive; applications from any African country meeting the crisis criteria would be eligible.

7. Main activities

- Finalize and publish the pilot call, application form, eligibility rules and assessment grid.
- Conduct targeted outreach through UNESCO field offices, national commissions, universities, scientific networks and partner organizations.
- Undertake an administrative eligibility review, followed by independent technical assessment by a balanced review panel.
- Transfer grants to host institutions and provide monitoring during implementation.
- Convene the six recipients as the nucleus of a future SCRS African Research Continuity Network to facilitate peer to peer mentorship and possible informal professional mentorship from UNESCO Chair.
- Document implementation experience and lessons for future SCRS programming and interventions.

8. Expected results

- Six crisis-affected scientists resume or complete an identifiable part of interrupted research.
- Host institutions strengthen their experience in supporting research continuity during crises and preserve research capacity, data and earlier investments.
- Locally led scientific knowledge remains available to scientific communities, national research systems and crisis recovery efforts.
- A balanced cohort is established, including strong participation by women and young scientists.
- Six short notes document on barriers, solutions and lessons to inform the future evolution of SCRS and its interventions.
- The recipients form the nucleus of a future network that may contribute advice, advocacy and after grant completion and subject to conflict-of-interest rules future peer review or review panel service.

9. Governance and proposed partners

UNESCO would manage the pilot call. A review panel could include UNESCO colleagues and invited independent experts. Potential partners, subject to interest and formal confirmation, include the Philipp Schwartz Initiative, EURAXESS Science4Refugees, CARA, the PAUSE Programme Hestia - Refugees in Science and UNESCO Chair and Centers for professional informal mentorship. Review panel members would sign confidentiality and conflict-of-interest declaration.

10. Indicative timeline and budget

Milestone	Proposed date
Call opens	05 October 2026
Applications close	15 November 2026, 23:59 Paris time
Eligibility and review panel evaluation	16 November-30 November 2026
Selected recipients announced	December 2026,
Grant agreements and transfers	December-January 2026
Implementation and reporting	Up to six months from receipt of funds

Proposed direct grant budget: USD 12,000 (six awards x USD 2,000). Staff time, communications, online review panel participation and monitoring would be provided in kind or covered separately.

references

- [1] Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), Global Report on Internal Displacement 2025, p. 29: https://api.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/idmc-grid-2025-global-report-on-internal-displacement.pdf#page=20
- [2] UNESCO Institute for Statistics, February 2025 UIS Data Release: Explore the latest progress on SDG 9.5 Research and Development through key indicators: https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/february-2025-uis-data-release-explore-latest-progress-sdg-95-research-and-development-through-key
- [3] UNESCO, African Perspectives on Scientific Freedom: Insights from Policy and Practice in 6 Countries (2024) p. 11. UNESCO publication: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391148
- UNESCO, 2026 Global Conference of the International Decade of Sciences for Sustainable Development: https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/2026-global-conference-international-decade-sciences-sustainable-development-2024-2033
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