



# VLIRUOS Partnership Policy

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## 1. Background and Purpose of this Policy

As the operational agency of the Flemish Rectors' Conference (VLIR), VLIRUOS is the leading funding body for scholarships for and partnerships between academics from Flanders and partner institutions in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, focused on global sustainable development.

VLIRUOS takes on different roles:

- **As a grant manager**, we develop and oversee a diverse portfolio of grant programmes designed to foster equitable partnerships between Flemish higher education institutions, academics, their peers in the Global South, and other stakeholders. Our portfolio includes established programmes while also providing opportunities for pioneering and innovation.
- **As a platform**, we bring together diverse groups to build multi-stakeholder partnerships and networks, empowering them to act as drivers and agents of change.
- **As a knowledge hub**, we create, pool, and mobilise knowledge and best practices for global sustainable development.

This VLIRUOS partnerships policy represents our the VLIRUOS commitment to the principles of mutually beneficial partnerships as a baseline for its successful cooperation model.

We aim to clarify with this policy document the main guidelines applicable for the partnerships -in practice the different programmes and individual projects within these programmes - supported by VLIRUOS. It provides a number of guiding principles and a framework that support the project set-up and implementation.

VLIRUOS seeks to empower institutions and individuals as critical drivers as well as agents of change through higher education partnerships for sustainable development. To this purpose, VLIRUOS aims to stimulate **sustainable, equal, balanced, mutually beneficial and knowledge-driven partnerships** across the borders of countries, institutions, disciplines and sectors to find solutions to the global challenges.

The partnership policy of VLIRUOS is to be contextualised within its overall policy framework whereby Agenda 2030 and the SDG principles serve as a compass. The academic authorities of all Flemish universities and universities of applied sciences and arts (UASA) highly value academic cooperation for global sustainable development and firmly believe in the strength of knowledge driven mutually beneficial global partnerships between higher education & science institutions and other society actors at a local, national, transnational and global scale.

The academic authorities recognise the dedication and work of individual academics within these academic and multistakeholder partnerships, as part of the overall scientific commitment of both the institutions and individual academics, generating a real sustainable impact on society, starting from global and local societal challenges. Moreover, these **partnerships** contribute to the quality of the Flemish higher education system, as well as of higher education systems and institutions in the respective partner countries.

## 2. Scope of the Policy

### 2.1. Formal set-up

VLIRUOS is part of the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR), the umbrella organisation of 5 Flemish universities. The 13 Flemish universities of applied sciences and arts (UASA) are not member of VLIR but are equal partners in the VLIRUOS organisational chart and operations.

Therefore, VLIRUOS is the platform through which Flemish universities and UASA pool expertise and efforts and work together in the context of higher education for global sustainable development (HE4SD).

Funded by DGD, VLIRUOS is the main funder of partnership projects between academics from Flanders and partner countries, as well as of scholarships for students and professionals from both Flanders and partner countries.

VLIRUOS is formally accredited by DGD. VLIRUOS is responsible for the policy framework, portfolio design, calls for and selection of project proposals, monitoring and evaluation of projects and policies, collective learning, and accountable to DGD for the management of the five-year programmes and budgets.

The identification, formulation and implementation of partnership projects and scholarships is the responsibility of the Flemish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), in cooperation with their partner Higher Education and Science Institutions (HE&SIs).

### 2.2. Direct and indirect partners of VLIRUOS

According to an approved five-year programme, which was concerted with its partners via presential and online discussion groups and surveys, VLIRUOS strives to realise its policy ambitions via the implementation of a set of programmes, of which most are based on competitive selection. As a grant manager, VLIRUOS launches project calls and supported by external expert commissions projects are assessed and selected. Project proposals can only be submitted by teams of academics that wish to engage in a partner agreement. The minimal conditions to present a project is that the team compositions consist of one or more academics affiliated to one or more Flemish higher education institutions in cooperation with academics affiliated to a partner higher education or science institution in a partner country in the Global South.

A distinction is made between the 18 **direct partners** of VLIRUOS, being the 18 Flemish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and the **indirect partners**, being the project partners of the Flemish HEIs. Therefore, we use the acronym HEIs when referring to the 18 direct partners, since these are all either universities or universities of applied sciences and arts; and the acronym HE&SIs for the indirect partner institutions because they can be either local universities, universities of applied sciences and arts or science institutions.

VLIRUOS primarily supports partnerships between universities and universities of applied sciences and arts as they play diverse but often complementary roles in Academic cooperation for global sustainable development. While universities hold expertise on scientific and fundamental research, universities of applied sciences and arts bring in their expertise regarding practice-oriented research and educational innovation, proceeding from concrete problems and working towards applicable solutions often with the involvement of external

stakeholders. Therefore, all programmes have been opened to universities as well as universities of applied sciences and arts.

## 2.3. Multi-Institutional and Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships

VLIRUOS encourages interinstitutional projects via the concept of **Multi-Institutional Partnerships** (MIP). This concerns a structural collaboration between several higher education institutions at Flemish/Belgian and/or partner level within the framework of a project, with the aim of increasing quality and obtaining better results by pooling available expertise. The different institutions take up a meaningful and important role in the project. In fact, the Flemish higher education institutions have recently created a platform through their “associatieve projecten” that are dedicatedly fostering these types of cooperation.

Moreover, the commitment to the SDG principles implies that collaboration with other actors, such as governments, private companies and civil society organisations is equally gaining importance in view of addressing interlinked development challenges, hence VLIRUOS also promotes the concept of **Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships** (MSP). Even more so because effective stakeholder management and engagement are expected to yield a conducive environment for knowledge valorisation and eventually societal change.

An MSP within the VLIRUOS approach concerns a structural collaboration with at least 1 non-academic actor (= multi-stakeholder; civil society, private sector, governmental actors, etc.) within the framework of a project, in which this actor plays an active role in the project implementation. The actors in the MSP work towards a common goal, with a clear division of roles and responsibilities, which are formalised, e.g. in the project agreement. VLIRUOS takes into account the MSP principle by promoting collaboration between different actors (beyond HEIs) to co-create, share, and mobilise knowledge and expertise across disciplines, sectors, interest groups, and borders. More precisely, VLIRUOS explicitly puts forward the science-society interface and knowledge uptake, and the importance of strengthening it.

## 3. Our Policy

In this section we will first focus on the characteristics of the VLIRUOS partnership model and the characteristics of a typical VLIRUOS partner university, which are important to understand and influence the specificity of the partnership principles as set out in the following section (3.3.).

### 3.1. Characteristics of the VLIRUOS partnership model

The **uniqueness of the VLIRUOS cooperation model** is based on practices and instruments specific to the higher education sector which are adapted to the paradigms and modes of operation of the development sector. VLIRUOS funded projects are academic projects focussing on education, research and/or service to society, but also on addressing locally identified and as priority recognized local and/or global sustainable development challenges. The modes of operation are academic – capacity building through education and research,

international exposure, exchange and cooperation – but objectives and content are global sustainable development focussed.

A number of elements are important within the VLIRUOS cooperation model:

- The principle of **academic freedom & initiative** (common interest and a voluntary commitment from academics, mutual benefits). VLIRUOS invests in sustainable partnerships based on a common interest and a voluntary commitment from academics. It is about (academic) collaboration and mutual capacity strengthening, rather than mere one-directional technical assistance. The partners search together for **answers and solutions to development challenges experienced at local, regional or global level** via balanced collaborations characterized by reciprocal exchanges and long-term perspectives. This cooperation model of VLIRUOS whereby each project is initiated by a(n) (team of) academic(s) affiliated to a Flemish HEI on the one hand and a partner HE&SI on the other, implies that academics develop a proposal for collaboration themselves within the framework set by VLIRUOS. Thereby, it is key that both Flemish and partner HE&SIs constitute a conducive environment for individual academics to engage in those kinds of partnerships.
- **The voluntary nature of partnerships:** the expertise made available by the academics (lecturers, researchers) involved in the VLIRUOS projects is mostly provided as an in-kind, non-remunerated input. Some exceptions are made for specific and temporary project tasks of involved personnel in partner countries, or for specific expertise development of Flemish staff that has to be compensated in policy-initiated projects (e.g. Bridging Science-Society).
- **Academic triad:** academic partnerships can focus on various dimensions of the academic triad (education, research and/or service delivery) and may involve organisational capacity strengthening to support this purpose. There are 6 possible domains that can be part of a partnership project, mostly more of them being interconnected: education programmes & methods, research programmes & methods, people, systems, policies and infrastructure, outreach & policy support, networks and partnerships. VLIRUOS is convinced that cooperation should go beyond the generation of research results for the academic community, and should equally facilitate the dissemination, uptake and application of knowledge, applications and services by diverse stakeholders at local, regional, and global levels.
- **Sustainability:** The goal of VLIRUOS partnerships is to build institutional capacity to meet the identified needs for research, education and/or societal service delivery in the long term and make outside support unnecessary. This also encompasses strengthening the sustainable development expertise and awareness within Flanders. VLIRUOS is convinced that the shared academic interest of the collaborating research or education teams provides a suitable ground from which avenues will be explored to pursue the continuation of the knowledge-driven partnership possibly with support from other stakeholders (private sector, civil society actors, public sector, general public, donors, ...).
- **Scientific initiative right and transparent competitive selection processes:** The mode of operation of VLIRUOS is aligned with standard practice within the scientific and academic community: working on the basis of mostly competitive calls for and selection of project proposals, whereby the initiative to identify and formulate a project proposal is taken by a team of academics, within the portfolio

framework of VLIRUOS. VLIRUOS relies upon transparent, external and objective selection and assessment of the project proposal. When selecting projects, attention is paid to quality, relevance, implementation set-up, and impact and sustainability. In the framework of the implementation set-up of a project attention is paid to the profile and commitment of the partner HE&SI. This practice of competition and ex ante evaluation is deemed to safeguard both quality and relevance, whereas the ownership of the supported projects is guaranteed by giving individual academics the right of initiative.

### 3.2. Characteristics of a VLIRUOS partner university

VLIRUOS facilitates cooperation between HEIs in Flanders and the Global South, based on a country list whereby the LNOB principle is applied.

Partner universities must pursue an active policy of cultural, ethnic, social and philosophical non-discrimination and be open to cooperation with any other institution and/or individual who adhere the same values, and need to have, or work on, a gender, integrity and human rights policy.

- A partner university is expected to develop proactive policies taking into account diversity, equality and inclusivity, sustainable development, respect for human rights and integrity, decent work, research ethics and research-based education, overall fairness, respect, care and honesty.
- Referring to the Human Rights policy at level of the Flemish higher education institutions, it is important to mention that also partner universities will be required to subscribe to the general policy and procedures which are part of all VLIRUOS project contracts: *“All parties pledge to uphold human rights as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. If one of the contracting parties is involved in a serious or systematic violation of human rights, the other party can unilaterally terminate the contract after a dialogue between all in-volved parties has taken place, with the goal of openly discussing problems, concerns, and possible solutions while taking into account each party's context.”*

### 3.3. VLIRUOS Partnership principles

As non-implementing organisation working on the preparation and monitoring of (competitive) calls for proposals, it is imperative to set out a clear set of guidelines for mainstreaming its rules and principles. This also applies for the partnership policy set-up.

VLIRUOS expects all parties involved in VLIRUOS funded partnerships (direct partners Flemish HEIS and indirect local partners HE&IS) to uphold a number of principles and to apply them throughout the implementation of a project or scholarship. This document mainly focuses on partnerships since most of VLIRUOS scholarships are embedded in partnerships.

This consists of:

- **The focus on the partner's needs and priorities as a starting point.** As it takes two to tango, however, this implies that by way of matchmaking (e.g. connect events), the partnership should correspond to the

available expertise and be based on a shared interest with respect to these identified needs and priorities.

- **Joint agenda-setting** is crucial in the **development of equal and mutually beneficial partnerships**, starting from the partner's needs and priorities, ensuring local and joint ownership.
- The belief in **balanced, mutually beneficial partnerships as a win-win**.
- **Sustainable, long-term partnerships**: for higher education cooperation to be effective, a long-term perspective is needed, and sufficient continuity must be assured.
- Pro-active strategies to ensure diversity, equality, and inclusivity, and that **vulnerable groups are included** in and benefit from higher education partnerships for sustainable development.
- Strategies to ensure principles of **decent work, research ethics, and research-based education** are taken into account.
- Strategies and action to **prevent and protect involved people and beneficiaries from risks related to violations** in these areas, and adherence to overall fairness, respect, care, and honesty.
- **Share** data, networks and results.
- Respect for **human rights and integrity**. Given the cooperation model of VLIRUOS, whereby a project agreement is signed by the implementing Flemish and partner HE&SIs that identifies the overall guiding principles, roles, and responsibilities of each participating institution and individual, the human rights' check is not only part of the VLIRUOS selection system (risk analysis and implementation set-up of the project), but in case human rights issues are identified, this can also occur on demand, during the pre-contracting stage of new partnerships or at any other moment during project implementation, when felt needed by one or more of the project partners).

This is translated in the preamble of each contract:

*All contracting parties are committed to contribute to the attainment of Agenda 2030 and to streamline the 3 SDG principles (Leave No One Behind, Multi-stakeholder partnerships, and Interconnectedness) throughout their goals, policies, and activities, as they relate to the project that is the object of this agreement.*

*Given the complexity, scale, and interconnectedness of current societal challenges, meaningful social, economic, and ecological transformations can only be realised by starting from a holistic and integrated approach to the SDGs. This by producing, sharing, and mobilising knowledge and expertise across disciplines, sectors, interest groups, and borders, and by engaging in equal multi-actor partnerships.*

*Higher Education and Science Institutions (HE&SIs) are committed to contribute to global citizenship education, fair partnerships, and a broader understanding of sustainable development into their threefold mission: research, education, and service to society.*

*The mandate of HE&SIs is the following:*

- *research generates new knowledge and ideas that can facilitate the attainment of Agenda 2030.*
- *education provides new generations of engaged, critical, global citizens with the necessary knowledge, skills and competences, as well as motivation to contribute to sustainable development as agents of change.*
- *knowledge mobilisation and uptake extend the impact of research and education to a wide array of stakeholders in society and enables these stakeholders to take action for sustainable development.*

*All contracting parties acknowledge the need throughout the implementation of the project:*

- *for pro-active strategies to ensure diversity, equality, and inclusivity, and that vulnerable groups are included in and benefit from higher education partnerships for sustainable development.*
- *to ensure meeting the needs of all people within the means of the planet.*
- *for respect for human rights and integrity.*
- *for decent work, research ethics, and research-based education.*
- *for strategies and action to prevent and protect involved people and beneficiaries from risks related to violations in these areas, and for adherence to overall fairness, respect, care, and honesty.*

*All contracting parties confirm that these ambitions are essential for the realisation of the objectives of the project and for its contribution to sustainable development. This agreement and its constituent articles will be interpreted in accordance with these ambitions.*

## 4. Roles and responsibilities

The implementation of our partnership policy is realised via the VLIRUOS grant management and platform roles and a clear distribution of roles can be identified between the VLIRUOS team and its direct and indirect partners.

In fact, the partnerships' principles and guidelines described in this policy are translated into programme Calls, project agreement documents, and monitoring/management tools applicable for the partnerships -in practice the different programmes - supported by VLIRUOS direct and indirect funding. These guidelines provide a framework that supports the project set-up and implementation.

### Division of responsibilities

There is a clear **division of tasks** between VLIRUOS and the Flemish universities and universities of applied sciences and arts. The universities and universities of applied sciences and arts propose the projects, together with their HE&SI counterparts in VLIRUOS partner countries and implement them after approval by a mandated VLIRUOS selection commission, and by DGD.

VLIRUOS is accountable to the government and therefore financially responsible for the management and use of the funds for the academic cooperation for global sustainable development of Flemish higher education. The financial risk for the respective projects is transferred by means of an implementation agreement with the concerned Flemish university or university of applied sciences and arts. The Flemish HEIs are accountable for the execution of the projects -for which VLIRUOS outlines the policy, conceptual and operational framework- to VLIRUOS. In turn, VLIRUOS is accountable to the federal government.

VLIRUOS organises the grant management and is responsible for the whole cycle, going from setting out the grant management framework, organising selections, contracting, monitoring and evaluation processes. In all these stages, partnership principles are taken on board. Most **projects** are selected on a (semi-)competitive basis by VLIRUOS.

Within VLIRUOS a whole team of expert staff is involved in the project cycle, whereby the programme managers are playing a central role in supporting the partnership set-up and network.

The division of responsibilities are described per project in a **partnership agreement (= project contract)**, concluded between VLIRUOS, the respective Flemish HEI(s) and the partner institution(s) in the project partner countries when applicable<sup>1</sup>. When the contribution of civil society or private sector actors are crucial to realise the project's objectives, they will also be added to the agreement. VLIRUOS is looking into ways how to do so as of 2025. All VLIRUOS contractual agreements are based on the general formal framework as determined by the federal government (DGD) for the financing of the development cooperation of Flemish higher education.

Once the contracts have been signed by all those involved and VLIRUOS has received the funds from the DGD, the project budget, as provided for in the contract, will be paid **in instalments** to the Flemish HEIs. The Flemish HEIs use part of the project funds for expenses incurred in Belgium managed by the Flemish HEIs (e.g. scholarship related costs paid out in Belgium, international travel, ...), but most of the funds are transferred to the HE&SIs in the project partner countries and managed by these partner institutions in line with the respective project agreement, depending on the local context.

## 5. Related Legislation and Charters

- The law of 19 March 2013 on Belgian Development Cooperation, as amended to date;
- The Royal Decree of 11 September 2016 on the Non-Governmental Cooperation, as amended to date, whereby the Royal Decree of 7 October 2021 authorises five-year programmes of institutional actors, among which VLIR, to start on 1 September instead of on 1 January, and to stop on 31 August instead of on 31 December.
- Royal Decree of 28 February 2023 elevating the existing Integrity Charter in Development Cooperation to a national standard for integrity policy and establishing a central reporting point for victims of abuse in Development Cooperation

## 6. Document Information and Revision History

|                         |                                                           |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Lead</b>             | Peter De Lannoy, Global Partnerships Coordinator          |
| <b>Version number</b>   | v2.0                                                      |
| <b>Date of approval</b> | December 2024                                             |
| <b>Next review date</b> | Early 2026, during the preparation of the FYP3 2027-2031. |

<sup>1</sup> In this case a tripartite agreement will be drafted which is equally signed by the partner HE&SIs.

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|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Associated VLIRUOS policies and frameworks</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• VLIRUOS Mission-Vision-Values</li> <li>• Financial Policy (2024)</li> <li>• <a href="#">Selection System Policy and Guidelines</a></li> <li>• VLIRUOS country list</li> <li>• Partnerships model agreement/contract with explicit references to a.o. societal commitment, equal partnerships, LNOB, decent work, respect for human rights, intellectual property rights</li> <li>• Contract organisatiekosten/ associatieve projecten</li> <li>• MIP framework</li> <li>• Integrity charter;</li> <li>• Integrity Policy (2024)</li> <li>• Transparency strategy (2024)</li> <li>• Gender Policy (2024)</li> <li>• Environmental Policy (2024)</li> <li>• Ethical Code</li> <li>• Risk Policy</li> </ul> |
| <b>Related VLIRUOS procedures</b>                 | <p>Not applicable</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |