



Peer review handbook

Development Research 2020

Instructions for reviewers

Swedish
Research
Council

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INTRODUCTION

Development research

The Government of Sweden has assigned the Swedish Research Council to administer support to the area of Development Research through the government's international aid budget. The Research Council funds research of the highest quality within the research area both through support to individual researchers in Sweden and through initiation of collaboration between researchers in Sweden and researchers in low-income and lower-middle income countries. The support should contribute to research-based knowledge to meet poverty-related problems and challenges primarily in low-income countries. The support to development research, in all disciplines, should increasingly be guided by an environmental and climate perspective in order to contribute to a fair and sustainable global development.

The Swedish Research Council's support to development research is aimed at:

- Strengthened high-quality research in Sweden that is of particular relevance to poverty reduction and sustainable development in low-income countries; and
- Strengthened knowledge exchange and collaboration between researchers in Sweden and researchers in low-income and lower middle-income countries, with a focus on research that is of high quality and of particular relevance to poverty reduction and sustainable development.

The classification of low-income and lower-middle income countries is according to the [DAC list of ODA recipients.](#)"

In 2013, the Swedish Research Council established a Committee for Development Research (here also referred to as "the Committee") at the Research Council. The Committee is tasked with shaping strategies and developing the process for issuing calls and evaluating scientific quality and relevance of the applications received. Furthermore, the Committee works on integrating Development Research more closely within the Swedish Research Council and the Swedish research landscape more generally. The Committee also issues calls and appoints review panel members, makes funding decisions based on the panels' reviews and recommendations, and develops the evaluation process. Read more about the Committee [here](#).

Three types of grants are issued by the Committee this year, the research project grant within Development Research, the research network grant Swedish Research Links (SRL), and an international post-doc grant within Development Research.

Research project grant within Development Research

The aim of the project grant in Development Research is to strengthen Swedish research of particular relevance to the fight against poverty and for sustainable development in low-income countries. High-quality research within all scientific disciplines, from basic to applied research, may be supported.

Network grant for international collaboration - Swedish Research Links (SRL)

The purpose of the grant is to support the development of long-term research partnerships of high scientific quality between Swedish researchers and researchers from low-income and lower middle-income countries. The grant should support the establishment of a network/collaboration based on principles of mutual benefit and equality, and should be aimed at developing a joint research project around a specific research idea on topics of particular relevance to the fight against poverty and for sustainable development in low-income and lower middle-income countries. The network grants shall in the first instance lead to joint applications for research funds from funding bodies, nationally and internationally. Network grants are in the first instance intended for new collaborations. However, existing networks may apply if they have new research ideas. If the network is not intended to develop new research projects, but to construct a network around existing research, the application must state strong grounds for why this is of great scientific importance.

International postdoc grant within Development Research

The purpose of the grant is to give newly qualified researchers with a doctoral degree from a Swedish university the opportunity to expand their networks and their competences by working abroad under secure employment conditions. At least two thirds of the grant period is spent abroad, of which at least one third in a low income or lower middle income country. This time may, however, be divided up into several shorter periods. The research shall be of particular relevance to the fight against poverty and for sustainable development in low-income countries.

REVIEW

General starting points and principles

There are certain guidelines and principles which apply during all steps of the review work, and which are important for you as a reviewer to know about.

Peer review

The portal paragraph to the Swedish Research Council's Instruction Ordinance establishes that "*the Swedish Research Council shall give support to basic research of the highest scientific quality within all fields of science*". The fundamental principle for assessing scientific quality is the peer review of applications for research grants that is carried out by the various review panels within each subject area. In order to provide a basis for the scientific review, the board of the Research Council has formulated guidelines for peer review based on eight principles (see Appendix for web link to more information).

Conflict of interest

A process involving peer review means that the evaluation of applications is carried out by researchers who are themselves part of the collective of researchers applying for grants. This creates a particular risk of conflicts of interest. In order to avoid any situation involving a conflict of interest, the Swedish Research Council has established strict internal guidelines (see Appendix for web link to more information). You are obliged as applicable to report any conflict of interest in relation to the applications you will be reviewing. In the event of any doubt, please confer with the chair and the Research Council personnel. Ultimately, the responsibility rests with the Research Council.

Confidentiality

Throughout the review process, applications and the review of applications shall be treated confidentially. You must not spread the documents that you have access to in your work as a reviewer, and you must delete them after the assignment has been completed. All communications between applicants and the Swedish Research Council concerning the review process shall be carried out via the Research Council's research officer responsible.

Prisma

The review work is carried out in the web-based system Prisma. In order to do this, you must register as a user in the system – further information on this is available in [Prisma's User Manual](#). If you have any questions concerning the system and cannot find the answer in Prisma's user manual, please contact the research officer responsible.

The role of the of the external reviewer

The three calls within Development Research (research project grants, research network grants (SRL) and international postdoc grants) are open to research within all scientific disciplines and applications are reviewed by one of three review panels named: Humanities and social sciences (UF-1), Natural, engineering and environmental sciences (UF-3), and Global health (UF-5).

Each application shall be reviewed and graded by at least four review panel members. If the joint competency of the review panel is not sufficient for a thorough review of an applications, or if a conflict of interest situation within the panel makes an application difficult to evaluate, the panel chair may request assistance in terms of an external assessment by an expert in the field. The external assessment will be made available to the panel to be taken into account in the discussions at the panel meeting and in the panel's final written statement. The written assessment by an external reviewer will not be made available to the applicant.

As external reviewer and expert in your field, your assessment is highly valuable to the panel, especially when the grading is well motivated in the written assessment. In particular, it is helpful to the panel if you provide clearly highlighted strengths and weaknesses of the proposal. If you are reviewing more than one proposal, it is also helpful if you rank them with respect to each other.

Evaluation criteria and grading scales

Your review shall only be based on the application contents. Information that is irrelevant to the review should not be used. Irrelevant information can sometimes be difficult to distinguish from expertise in the field. Examples of irrelevant information are details of the applicant's private life, various types of rumour, such as lack of research ethics or assumptions that someone else might have written the application.

The starting point for the evaluation is that the content of an application and the information about the applicant shall not be shared with others during the review process. Sometimes questions arise whether it is acceptable to consult with a colleague on certain parts of a research plan. This may be justified as long as the application is not shared with third parties, and the consultation is limited to specific questions, such as the use of statistics or new research findings. It is your task as a reviewer to assess the application in its entirety.

You must contact the Swedish Research Council immediately if you suspect any deviation from ethical guidelines or good research practice, or if you suspect scientific misconduct. The Swedish Research Council will ensure that the matter is further investigated.

Your review shall be based on four evaluation criteria –the Scientific quality of the proposed research/network, Novelty and originality, the Merits of the applicant/network, and the Feasibility. These are the Research Council's basic criteria for evaluating quality. In addition, a fifth basic criteria is assessed for network grants; Complementarity of the research collaboration, and for international postdoc grants; Internationalization and the research environment.

Applications within all three calls should also be reviewed based on their Relevance for the call.

The criteria are evaluated against a seven- or three-point grading scales (as detailed below), and are intended to reflect the application's "quality profile". Please observe that the grading scale is an ordinal scale, where it is not possible to specify differences or distances between the values. For the basic criteria, there is no pre-determined cut-off for what is considered a fundable application¹. However, for the criterion Relevance for the call, a grade of less than 2 for will lead to sifting of the application.

To facilitate the evaluation of the various criteria, there are a number of guiding questions to be taken into account in the evaluation work. These are listed below for each call.

Please note:

You do not have to consider the classification codes for research topic and SDG relevance in your assessment. These are included for administrative and reporting purposes only.

To include sex and gender perspectives in research can concern anything from including and analysing both women and men in the study material (sex perspective) to applying a problematising and reflecting attitude to how gender affiliations are created and understood (gender perspective). Please observe that a gender perspective in the content of the research should not be confused with an even distribution of women and men in the research team or gender equality in assessment of applications.

For the external review, the written assessment is more valuable to the panel than the numerical grading, so please put emphasis on this part of your review task.

¹ In the 2019 Development Research call, all project grant applications that were granted had an overall grade of at least 5.

Guiding questions for research project grants

The scientific quality of the proposed research

- Is the project scientifically significant?
- Does the proposal have clear conceptual and theoretical foundations?
- Is the overall design and description of the project sufficiently clear and systematic, for example in its definition of research questions, hypotheses and methodology?
- Are the scientific/intellectual merits of the proposed research clear, convincing and compelling?
- Does the proposed project have the character of thoroughness, e.g. in its definition of the problem, and review of the state of the art?
- Are the proposed research methods suitable to the aims and objectives?
- Are the methods of data management such as data collection, analysis and statistics well defined and appropriate?
- If there are no participating researchers from low-income countries: Has the applicant convincingly described how this may or may not affect the scientific quality of the project?
- Has the applicant in a satisfactory manner described the possible importance of sex and/or gender for the research project? If not, is there a clear description to why?
- If sex and gender is described as relevant to the research project, has the applicant considered sex and gender in the study design and description of the proposed work, for instance as part of preliminary data, the choice of samples or study population, or data analyses?

Novelty and originality

- Does the project extend or challenge current understanding, opinion or practice in its field?
- To what extent does the proposed project define new, compelling scientific questions within its scientific area?
- Does the proposed project have the potential to substantially increase the knowledge within its scientific area? (For example novel concepts or theories, new directions for research and advancement of the field)
- Does the project include use of novel technologies/methodologies, or innovative application of existing methodologies/technologies in a novel way or context?
- Does the researcher propose a line of research with clear progression and novelty in relation to previous research in the field or is he/she simply adding details to existing knowledge?
- In what novel way does the proposed project have potential for scientific and/or societal impact in low income countries?

The merits of the applicant

- Do the applicant, participating researchers and other team members have sufficient research experience and expertise in the research area of the proposed project? (Also considering how the different roles and responsibilities are distinguished.)
- Considering the research area and the applicant's career age: Of what merits are the previous publications and other scientific achievements (e.g. supervisor experience, external funding, research collaborations)? Do these show a distinct and independent line of research?
- Is there ability to successfully disseminate research findings?
- Does the applicant have a sufficient scientific network for implementing the proposed project?

A seven-grade scale is used to evaluate the criteria Scientific quality of the proposed research, Novelty and originality, and the Merits of the applicant.

Outstanding Exceptionally strong application with negligible weaknesses	7
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Excellent Very strong application with negligible weaknesses	6
Very good to excellent Very strong application with minor weaknesses	5
Very good Strong application with minor weaknesses	4
Good Some strengths, but also moderate weaknesses	3
Weak A few strengths, but also at least one major weakness or several minor weaknesses	2
Poor Very few strengths, and numerous major weaknesses	1

Feasibility

- Is the general design, including time schedule, optimal for implementing the proposed project?
- Does the project include the availability and accessibility of personnel with relevant skills? (Also taking into consideration the activity level.)
- Is the environment suitable for carrying out the proposed research, considering e.g. equipment, facilities/infrastructures and other necessary resources and support?
- If applicable, is it described how the permits for implementation of the project will be acquired?
- Are the proposed research methods, infrastructures, experiments and fieldwork appropriate for the implementation of the project?
- How is the balance between the project's feasibility and risks and its potential gains? (high risk/high gain)

A three-grade scale is used to carry out an evaluation of the feasibility of the proposed project.

Feasible	3
Partly feasible	2
Not feasible	1

For all criteria, you can also mark "Insufficient", if you consider that the application lacks sufficient information to allow a reasonable evaluation to be made of the criterion.

Overall grade

Finally, you shall weigh together the various subsidiary criteria into an overall grade according to the seven-grade scale above. The overall grade is not the same as an average grade or a summary of the subsidiary evaluations; instead, it shall reflect the scientific quality of the application as a whole. It is not a condition that the quality concept covers all aspects of the various criteria, nor that they have the same relative weight for all applications. In normal cases, however, a strongly positive evaluation of only one criterion cannot outweigh other weaknesses of an application when weighed together.

Relevance for the call

Relevance to the program objectives is evaluated separately from the scientific quality, and is not included in the overall grade. Research Project Grants in Development Research are financed through development aid

funds provided by the government, and research receiving support must be of particular relevance to poverty reduction and sustainable development in low-income countries.

- Does the proposed research have the potential to create preconditions for better living conditions for people living in poverty and under oppression?
- To what extent does the proposed research contribute to tackling important societal and environmental challenges in low income countries?
- Does the proposed research have the potential to promote equitable and sustainable development in low-income countries?

A three-grade scale is used to evaluate the relevance.

Very relevant	3
Relevant	2
Not relevant	1

Guiding questions for network grants – Swedish Research Links

The scientific quality of the proposed network

- Does the proposed collaboration network have the potential to build a sustainable and equal scientific partnership to address development challenges?
- To what extent can the proposed network, based on the included collaborators, define new, compelling scientific questions within its scientific area?
- How does the research collaboration build on the research conducted independently by the partners, and what is the potential added value of the network?
- Is the overall description of the collaborative network sufficiently clear, convincing and compelling, for example in the definition of research questions, description of planned activities and impact of the research collaboration?
- Does the proposal contain plans for sustaining the collaboration/partnership beyond the proposed duration of network funding?

Novelty and originality

- To what extent does the proposed network promote the establishment of a new research network and new researcher-to-researcher relationships?
- *If principal investigators have collaborated before:* Is the proposed collaboration based on a new research topic? What were the experiences of that previous collaboration and can additional funding lead to new collaborative research proposals with realistic ideas how to obtain funding?
- Does the network combine scientific expertise and capacity in a novel way in relation to the research area and the countries involved?
- Does the network have the potential to extend or challenge current understanding, opinion or practice in its field?
- Does the research network propose a line of research with clear progression and novelty in relation to previous research in the field or will the formed network simply add details to existing knowledge?
- In what novel way does the proposed network have potential for scientific and/or societal impact in low-income and lower middle-income countries?

The merits of the network

- Does the network have sufficient research experience, expertise and scientific connections for the implementation of the proposed collaboration?
- Considering the research area and career ages: Of what merits are the previous publications and other scientific achievements (e.g. supervisor experience, external funding, research collaborations)? Do these show a distinct and independent line of research?
- Does the applicant have previous experience from research collaborations with partners in low-income or lower middle-income countries?

A seven-grade scale is used to evaluate the criteria Scientific quality of the proposed network, Novelty and originality, and the Merits of the network.

Outstanding Exceptionally strong application with negligible weaknesses	7
Excellent Very strong application with negligible weaknesses	6
Very good to excellent Very strong application with minor weaknesses	5
Very good Strong application with minor weaknesses	4
Good Some strengths, but also moderate weaknesses	3
Weak A few strengths, but also at least one major weakness or several minor weaknesses	2
Poor Very few strengths, and numerous major weaknesses	1

Feasibility

- Is the proposed plan in general, including activities and time schedule, optimal for starting up and implementing the proposed network?
- Does the network aim to establish long-term research collaboration and contain a realistic plan for how to raise funds for such collaboration?
- Does the proposed collaboration network include the availability and accessibility of relevant personnel, skills, equipment, facilities/infrastructures and other necessary resources?
- Is the environment suitable for carrying out the proposed network activities?

A three-grade scale is used to carry out an evaluation of the feasibility of the proposed network.

Feasible	3
Partly feasible	2
Not feasible	1

Complementarity of the research collaboration

- Is there appropriateness of the team members in terms of how the researchers' expertise complement each other, and in how the different roles and responsibilities are distinguished?
- Does the collaboration bring mutual added value to the proposed research; compared to if the partners were not working together?
- Can the collaboration lead to transfer of knowledge between applicants?
- Is the collaboration based on principles of co-design, mutual benefit and equality?

The seven-grade scale (used to evaluate the criteria Scientific quality of the proposed network, Novelty and originality, and the Merits of the network) is also used to evaluate the criterion Complementarity of the research collaboration, which applies only to applications for network grants (SRL).

For all criteria, you can also mark "Insufficient", if you consider that the application lacks sufficient information to allow a reasonable evaluation to be made of the criterion.

Overall grade

Finally, you shall weigh together the various subsidiary criteria into an overall grade according to the seven-grade scale above. The overall grade is not the same as an average grade or a summary of the subsidiary evaluations; instead, it shall reflect the scientific quality of the application as a whole. It is not a condition that the quality concept covers all aspects of the various criteria, nor that they have the same relative weight for all applications. In normal cases, however, a strongly positive evaluation of only one criterion cannot outweigh other weaknesses of an application when weighed together. For network grants (SRL), the scientific quality and the complementarity of the proposed network should be given more weight in the overall grade.

Relevance for the call

Relevance to the program objectives is evaluated separately from the scientific quality, and is not included in the overall grade. Network grants (SRL) are financed by development aid funds provided by the government, and research receiving support must be of particular relevance to poverty reduction and sustainable development in low-income and lower-middle income countries.

- Does the proposed research idea have the potential to create preconditions for better living conditions for people living in poverty and under oppression?
- To what extent does the proposed research idea contribute to tackling important societal and environmental challenges in low-income and lower middle-income countries?
- Does the proposed research idea have the potential to promote equitable and sustainable development in low-income and lower middle-income countries?

A three-grade scale is used to evaluate relevance.

Very relevant	3
Relevant	2
Not relevant	1

Guiding questions for international postdoc grants

The scientific quality of the proposed research

- Is the project scientifically significant?
- Does the proposal have clear conceptual and theoretical foundations?

- Is the overall design and description of the project sufficiently clear and systematic, for example in its definition of research questions, hypotheses and methodology?
- Are the scientific/intellectual merits of the proposed research clear, convincing and compelling?
- Does the proposed project have the character of thoroughness, e.g. in its definition of the problem, and review of the state of the art?
- Are the proposed research methods suitable to the aims and objectives?
- Are the methods of data management such as data collection, analysis and statistics well defined and appropriate?
- Has the applicant in a satisfactory manner described the possible importance of sex and/or gender for the research project? If not, is there a clear description to why?
- If sex and gender is described as relevant to the research project, has the applicant considered sex and gender in the study design and description of the proposed work, for instance as part of preliminary data, the choice of samples or study population, or data analyses?

Novelty and originality

- Does the project extend or challenge current understanding, opinion or practice in its field?
- To what extent does the proposed project define new, compelling scientific questions within its scientific area?
- Does the proposed project have the potential to substantially increase the knowledge within its scientific area? (For example novel concepts or theories, new directions for research and advancement of the field)
- Does the project include use of novel technologies/methodologies, or innovative application of existing methodologies/technologies in a novel way or context?
- Does the researcher propose a line of research with clear progression and novelty in relation to previous research in the field or is he/she simply adding details to existing knowledge?
- In what novel way does the proposed project have potential for scientific and/or societal impact in low-income countries?

The merits of the applicant

- How strong are the applicant's merits and competence in relation to career age, research area and previous research environment?
- To what degree does the applicant's previous experience and scientific competence strengthen the project?
- Do the publications and other scientific achievements of the applicant show the potential for a distinct and independent line of research? Focus is on the most relevant and important reports, with emphasis on quality rather than quantity.
- Does the applicant have a sufficient scientific network for implementing the proposed project?

A seven-grade scale is used to evaluate the criteria scientific quality of the proposed research, novelty and originality, and the merits of the applicant.

Outstanding Exceptionally strong application with negligible weaknesses	7
Excellent Very strong application with negligible weaknesses	6
Very good to excellent Very strong application with minor weaknesses	5
Very good Strong application with minor weaknesses	4

Good Some strengths, but also moderate weaknesses	3
Weak A few strengths, but also at least one major weakness or several minor weaknesses	2
Poor Very few strengths, and numerous major weaknesses	1

Feasibility

- Is the general design, including time schedule, optimal for implementing the proposed project?
- Does the project include the availability and accessibility of personnel with relevant skills? (Also taking into consideration the activity level.)
- Is the environment suitable for carrying out the proposed research, considering e.g. equipment, facilities/infrastructures and other necessary resources and support?
- If applicable, is it described how the permits for implementation of the project will be acquired?
- Are the proposed research methods, infrastructures, experiments and fieldwork appropriate for the implementation of the project?
- How is the balance between the project's feasibility and risks and its potential gains? (high risk/high gain)

A three-grade scale is used to carry out an evaluation of the feasibility of the proposed project.

Feasible	3
Partly feasible	2
Not feasible	1

Internationalisation and research environment

Here an evaluation is made of the opportunities for the applicant to develop her or his merits as a researcher at the foreign host institution(s).

- To what extent does the foreign host institution(s) seem relevant for the research the application concerns?
- How suitable is the foreign research environment for the applicant's ability to develop new competences, his or hers research network and independence as a researcher?
- If the applicant plans to spend time in Sweden, is that time well motivated and is the research environment favourable for the applicant's ability to develop as a researcher?

The criterion is evaluated on a three-grade scale:

Excellent	3
Appropriate	2
Weak	1

For all criteria, you can also mark "Insufficient", if you consider that the application lacks sufficient information to allow a reasonable evaluation to be made of the criterion.

Overall grade

Finally, you shall weigh together the various subsidiary criteria into an overall grade according to the seven-grade scale above. The overall grade is not the same as an average grade or a summary of the subsidiary evaluations; instead, it shall reflect the scientific quality of the application as a whole. It is not a condition that the quality concept covers all aspects of the various criteria, nor that they have the same relative weight for all applications. In normal cases, however, a strongly positive evaluation of only one criterion cannot outweigh other weaknesses of an application when weighed together.

Relevance for the call

Relevance to the program objectives is evaluated separately from the scientific quality, and is not included in the overall grade. International postdoc grants within development research are financed by development aid funds provided by the government, and research receiving support must be of particular relevance to poverty reduction and sustainable development in low-income countries.

- Does the proposed research have the potential to create preconditions for better living conditions for people living in poverty and under oppression?
- To what extent does the proposed research contribute to tackling important societal and environmental challenges in low-income countries?
- Does the proposed research have the potential to promote equitable and sustainable development in low-income countries?

A three-grade scale is used to evaluate relevance.

Very relevant	3
Relevant	2
Not relevant	1

APPENDIX

Useful links and information

Swedish Research Council policies

Principles for peer review

<https://www.vr.se/english/applying-for-funding/how-applications-are-assessed.html#Eightprinciplestosafeguardquality>

Conflict of interest policy

<https://www.vr.se/english/applying-for-funding/how-applications-are-assessed/how-we-avoid-conflicts-of-interest.html>

Gender equality strategy

<https://www.vr.se/english/applying-for-funding/how-applications-are-assessed/gender-equality.html>

Call texts 2020

Research project grant in development research

<https://www.vr.se/english/applying-for-funding/calls/2019-11-14-research-project-grant-within-development-research.html>

Network grant for international collaboration – Swedish Research Links

<https://www.vr.se/english/applying-for-funding/calls/2019-11-14-network-grant-for-international-collaboration---swedish-research-links.html>

International postdoc grant within development research

<https://www.vr.se/english/applying-for-funding/calls/2019-11-14-international-postdoc-grant-within-development-research.html>

Prisma

Prisma

<https://prisma.research.se/>

User manual

<http://prismasupport.research.se/user-manual/reviewer.html>

Reviewer FAQ

<http://prismasupport.research.se/user-manual/faq/reviewer.html>

Support form for technical issues in Prisma

<http://prismasupport.research.se/user-manual/send-a-request-to-prisma-support.html>

Instruction films

Prisma – Intro

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/mRKmw16wUbl>

Prisma – Conflict of interest

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/qdw82TnORA0>

Prisma – Review

<https://youtu.be/q2JtH69fOZk>

General information

Review panels within development research at the Swedish Research Council

<https://www.vr.se/english/applying-for-funding/how-applications-are-assessed/review-panels.html#?subject=Development%20Research>

Strategy for research cooperation and research in development cooperation 2015-2021

<http://www.government.se/country-and-regional-strategies/2015/06/strategy-for-research-cooperation-and-research-in-development-cooperation-2015-2021/>

Sweden's Aid Policy Framework

<http://www.regeringen.se/rattsdokument/skrivelse/2014/03/comm.-201314131/>

OECD/DAC List of ODA Recipients

<http://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-standards/DAC-List-of-ODA-Recipients-for-reporting-2020-flows.pdf>