



SAEON

South African Environmental
Observation Network

BRIEFING NOTE

IORAG's ROLE IN ENHANCING ACADEMIC COLLABORATION WITHIN IORA

FEBRUARY 2024

PREPARED BY: SISIPHO NJOKWENI & NICOLE DU PLESSIS

Objective – A briefing note/policy brief aims to provide a concise outcome-based synopsis of recent research or expert opinion that may inform decision making and activities by authorities, NGOs and NPOs. The policy note series aims to complement the academic peer reviewed literature published by NRF-SAEON, and highlight key messages from high-level engagements.

Key Recommendations:

- **South Africa should continue supporting the IORAG as a platform for boundary spanning engagements (i.e., science-policy-business actions).**
- **South Africa should enhance activities to increase the visibility of IORA, both nationally and internationally.**
- **South Africa should leverage IORA activities to increase regional policy, science, and innovation research and capacity building for national development.**

Executive Summary

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), established in 1997, aims to foster economic cooperation and sustainable development within the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The Indian Ocean Rim Academic Group (IORAG), a crucial component of IORA, serves as a platform for academics to actively contribute to policy development and project recommendations. South Africa, as the Chair of IORAG for 2022-2023, played a leading role, chaired two meetings that focused on the academic-policy interface in IORA.

The 27th IORAG meeting in 2022, concentrated on strengthening academic-policy connections and delved into water sciences. Priority actions and recommendations from the 27th meeting emphasized engaging policymakers, enhancing communication strategies, promoting technology and innovation cooperation, and implementing capacity-building activities. The 28th meeting in 2023, themed "Enhancing IORAG as a Vehicle for Youth Empowerment," aimed to catalyze research initiatives and collaboration within the IOR. Key sessions covered orientation on IORA, reflections on its 25-year strategic dialogue, and collaborative ventures with the Indian Ocean Rim Business Forum.

The 28th meeting proposed the establishment of the IORA University Network, finalising the establishment of an Early-Career Professionals Network, an IORA portal for mobility and scholarships, and academic engagement on the Indo-Pacific Outlook. Additionally, support for joint publication projects and fostering academia-industry linkages was highlighted.

IORAG's recommendations underscore the need for improved communication, technology sharing, capacity building, and collaboration with policymakers. The establishment of networks and portals aims to enhance academic collaboration, support youth capacity development, and contribute to the deeper understanding of regional issues. Encouraging academia-industry linkages is crucial for translating research into practical applications, aligning with IORA's goals of sustainable development and cooperation in science and technology. The IORAG's role in advancing academic dialogue and collaboration within the IOR is pivotal for achieving the organisation's broader objectives, and aligns to the objectives of South Africa's White Paper on Science, Technology and Innovation.

1. Background on IORA and IORAG

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is an intergovernmental organisation that was established in March 1997, with the primary objective of promoting economic cooperation and sustainable development within the Indian Ocean Region. IORA currently consists of 23 Member States and 11 Dialogue Partners, with the purpose of increasing understanding and mutually beneficial cooperation through a consensus-based, evolutionary, and non-intrusive approach. The organisation serves as a platform for fostering dialogues, collaboration, and partnerships to address shared challenges and harness opportunities within the Indian Ocean Region. IORA has six priority areas and two cross-cutting priority areas which include Maritime Safety and Security; Trade and Investment and Facilitation; Fisheries Management; Disaster Risk Management; Tourism and Cultural Exchanges; Academic, Science and Technology Cooperation; Blue Economy; and Women's Economic Empowerment.

The Indian Ocean Rim Academic Group (IORAG) emerged as a pivotal institutional mechanism during the establishment of the IORA. IORAG is positioned as the primary vehicle for academics, universities, think tanks, and scientific and technological centers to actively contribute to policy development and project recommendations within the Indian Ocean region. The objective of the IORAG is to engage in coordinated and rigorous research, offering evidence-based recommendations. The IORAG stands as a cornerstone of academic engagement within the IORA. It serves as an advisory body, addressing government and business needs, stimulating intellectual dialogue, and contributing to the development and dissemination of IORA's vision.

South Africa established a local Chapter of the Indian Ocean Rim Academic Group (SA IORAG) in 2016, under the guidance of the Department of Science and Innovation, with support of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation, and other relevant national research bodies. The academic group is composed of (senior and early-career) researchers and academics from universities across South Africa, research institutions, NGOs, and think tanks. The aim of the SA IORAG is to support South Africa's international science and innovation goals.

South Africa was Chair of the IORAG for 2022-2023, and hosted two IORAG Meetings. Continued active engagement within IORA aims to assist in reaching the goals of the White Paper on Science, Technology and Innovation.

2. Summary of the 27th IORAG meeting

The 27th Meeting of the IORAG took place virtually on the 14th of September 2022, and was chaired by Prof Juliet Hermes from (NRF-SAEON, South Africa). The meeting was attended by delegates from 10 Member States and 3 Dialogue Partners. Representatives from the IORA Regional Centre for Science and Technology Transfer (RCSTT), the Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association (WIOMSA) and the Indian Ocean Research Group (IORG) also attended the meeting.

The meeting focused on two academic sessions on the themes, 'Strengthening the Academic-Policy Interface' and 'Water Sciences in IORA'. This was followed by the administrative session, which provided an opportunity to discuss and provide updates to the IORAG Work Plan 2022-2027.

3. Summary of the 28th IORAG meeting

The 28th Meeting of the IORAG took place from 26th to the 27th of September 2023, in Cape Town, South Africa. This in-person gathering played a crucial role in bringing together representatives from national universities, research institutions, and policymakers. The primary objective was to catalyze research initiatives and collaboration within the Indian Ocean Region. The meeting drew participation from delegates representing 12 IORA Member States, 1 Dialogue partner, and 1 Observer institution. The meeting was chaired by Prof Juliet Hermes from (NRF-SAEON, South Africa), and was centered around the theme "Enhancing IORAG as a Vehicle for Youth Empowerment in the Indian Ocean Region."

The first session on Day 1 featured diverse sessions covering essential topics such as an orientation on IORA aimed at new IORAG participants, reflections on the 'High-Level Strategic Dialogue on IORA's 25-Years – Reflection, Review & Renewal', and collaborative ventures with the Indian Ocean Rim Business Forum (IORBF), particularly focusing on mapping a business and commercial ecosystem for the IORAG. These sessions offered valuable insights into mechanisms for collaboration within IORA.

The second session was parallel discussions sessions. The first group focused on the development of the IORAG as a 'think tank', or knowledge resource for the region, followed by reflections on the outcomes of the 27th IORAG meeting session on 'Strengthening the Academic-Policy Interface', and the proposal for the establishment of an IORA University Network; and the development of an IORA portal to facilitate mobility, scholarships, and mentorship opportunities. Additionally, discussions explored potential

contributions of the IORAG could assist with implementation of the IORA Indo-Pacific Outlook. The second group focused on the development of the IORAG Early-Career Professionals Network (ECPN). The meeting concluded with an administrative session, on Day 2, concentrated on the updates and inputs to the Work Plan of the IORAG for the period of 2022-2027.

4. Priority Actions and Recommendations from the 27th IORAG Meeting

- **Engaging policymakers:** Improve engagement with policymakers in the research process to improve understanding of research and its outcomes to improve chances of implementing recommendations.
- **Making IORAG visible through enhanced communication strategies:** Review and improve communication to find creative ways to make IORA/IORAG and its research visible in the region, by utilizing platforms accessible to the target audience.
- **Technology and Innovation Cooperation:** Demonstration, sharing and encouraging the adoption of innovations. Establish a platform for the exchange of technological advancements and innovations among IORA Member States.
- **Capacity building activities:** To implement capacity building programmes, training sessions and lectures in the identified areas, to enhance skills and capabilities of individuals and institutions within the region.

5. Priority Actions and Recommendations from the 28th IORAG Meeting

- **The establishment of the IORA University Network:** To enhance collaboration and knowledge sharing among IORA Member States through academic institutions.
- **Development of an early-career Professionals (E-CP) network within IORA:** to support youth capacity development in the region.
- **Establishment of an IORA portal of mobility, exchange, mentorships and scholarships:** To encourage regional engagement, and leveraging ongoing activities by Member States.
- **Supporting academic engagement on the Indo-Pacific Outlook:** To contribute to a deeper understanding and informed discussion among stakeholders.
- **A joint publication project with the NAM S&T Centre:** Sharing of scientific and technological knowledge, supporting IORA's goals of sustainable development and cooperation in science and technology.
- **Encourage more academic research and engagement on connectivity:** To provide a platform for intellectual exchange, cultivating a deeper understanding of

regional issues. This would be through hosting of an Academic Dialogue and the creation of a repository for the IORAG for dissemination of research.

- **Foster academia-industry linkages through dissemination of research and innovation among IORA Member States:** To strengthen the connections between academia and industry which can lead to practical applications of research and innovation.