

HM Government Response

HM Government Response to the Independent Commission for Aid Impact rapid review of the Global Challenges Research Fund: September 2017

Her Majesty's Government welcomes the report of the ICAI rapid review of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). We are pleased ICAI has acknowledged the role of the GCRF in helping to address pressing global development challenges. The UK played a leading role in defining the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and is firmly committed to working in partnership to implement them. The GCRF will ensure that the UK's world-leading science, research and development base are used to tackle these global development challenges. It provides a unique opportunity to build an interdisciplinary global community of researchers committed to achieving a positive transformational impact on development research. The Fund represents a step change in the UK government's funding for development research and underlines the UK's continued global leadership and commitment to helping meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

We welcome ICAI's recognition of the strength of using established delivery partner mechanisms for identifying research excellence and the novel approach taken around supporting interdisciplinary research. The UK research community is world leading and GCRF will further enhance its ability to generate knowledge needed to improve the lives of the poorest people and communities.

The GCRF structures and processes have been developed rapidly since the fund was announced in November 2015 and continue to evolve. The recommendations largely reflect work already underway to further develop the GCRF research portfolio as part of ensuring a joined-up, cross-Whitehall approach to tackling global challenges and greater engagement with partners in the global south. We will work actively on the issues identified with our delivery partners and across government to further implementation of the recommendations and take forward action around the other findings highlighted in the report.

Recommendation 1: To increase its prospects of achieving transformative research impact, the GCRF should develop a more deliberate strategy that encourages a concentration of research portfolios around high-priority global development challenges, with a stronger orientation towards development impact.

Partially Accept

- The GCRF Strategy follows the UK Aid Strategy and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The Strategy has identified 12 priority challenges grouped within three main themes and also specifies core criteria to be used by all GCRF delivery partners to maximise development impact (problem and solution focused; research excellence; likelihood of impact; capacity building and partnership). We recognise that the early programmes and calls were launched before the GCRF Strategy was formally in place and we are now looking to strengthen the development impact within recent and future activity.
- The GCRF Strategy gives particular priority to interdisciplinary approaches which seek to understand complex and interconnected development challenges. It is through understanding the interactions between the challenges, and particularly the obstacles to development that result from competing priorities, that the

production of innovative and transformative research and solution will best be facilitated. This approach was advised by the independent GCRF Strategic Advisory Group and aligns with the thinking from the United Nations, and international and multilateral development agencies.

- We agree that stronger coordination within the GCRF research portfolio would be beneficial as the fund matures from its early stages of operation. This will enable strategic dialogue with important policy/practice users, maximise opportunities for leverage from other funders, and increase the likelihood of strong development impacts. We are already taking steps to ensure greater coherence across programmes and projects for example:
 - Establishing, in the first instance, six portfolios designed to extract and amplify the research outcomes and impact of GCRF as a whole against particular sets of challenges. These portfolios will focus on Global Health; Food Systems; Security Protracted Conflict, Refugee Crises and Forced Displacement; Education; Resilience to Environmental Shocks and Change; Cities and Sustainable Infrastructure and Health.
 - Providing additional funding to Research Councils UK (RCUK) to recruit six or more “Challenge Leaders”. These thematic leaders will build coherence across all GCRF delivery partners and produce areas of greater focus whilst supporting multidisciplinary approaches.
 - Improving our reporting and analysis of the GCRF portfolio to help inform discussions in the independent Strategy Advisory Group and enable better informed decision-making by the BEIS Research & Innovation ODA Board and Science Minister.
- We are also supporting the establishment of Research Hubs that will provide a unique global resource to access interdisciplinary expertise, as well as other specialist competences needed for effective development impact

Recommendation 2: The GCRF should develop clearer priorities and approaches to partnering with research institutions in the ‘global South’.

Accept

- From the outset, GCRF deliberately took a very open and inclusive approach to global collaboration, encouraging researchers to develop partnerships with the DAC countries most appropriate to a particular research question. However, it takes time to develop strong partnership with research institutions from new countries and in its first year, the research community tended to build from their existing partnerships in developing countries.
- As GCRF continues to develop its priorities and approaches to partnering with research institutions in the global south. GCRF delivery partners are already undertaking greater outreach on global engagement. RCUK are now leading a coordinated programme of events and activities involving all GCRF delivery partners, including flagship events in South America, Africa and South Asia. These Global Engagement Meetings provide a direct route for experts and stakeholders from developing countries to forge new collaborations with UK

experts. The meetings will be built upon by the piloting of a number of southern-led research networks, which will provide a stronger channel for non-UK input to GCRF.

- Other GCRF delivery partners are also undertaking their own specific engagement with the global south on particular themes. For example, the Royal Academy of Engineering runs three dedicated programmes in sub-Saharan Africa leveraging UK research and innovation expertise to build capacity around industry-academic partnership, researcher entrepreneurship and engineering professional institutions.
- BEIS and its delivery partners are looking to consolidate ethical principles for GCRF in line with international good practice (e.g. the Research Fairness Initiative Framework). This includes approaches to conducting research in developing countries and will be guided by a high-level review of ethical standards currently being scoped by the UK Collaborative on Development Science.
- We will continue to monitor the development of partnerships with research institutions in the global south and, together with feedback from the Global Engagement Meetings and other events, use this to inform our future approaches to partnering. In doing so BEIS will work closely with DfID and other government departments to ensure GCRF complements and work in synergy with other ODA programmes and that our country activity and footprint is strategically organised.

Recommendation 3: BEIS should develop a results framework for assessing the overall performance, impact and value for money of the GCRF portfolio, drawing on DFID's guidelines on value for money in research and evidence programming.

Accept

- All delivery partners for the GCRF are required to provide assurance to BEIS that their activities are ODA compliant, represent value for money and that risks are being managed. BEIS oversee and monitor delivery partner activity through regular reporting and holding them to account through the Research & Innovation ODA Board.
- BEIS has recently awarded a contract to Itad Ltd in Collaboration with Oxford Policy Management to undertake the Foundation stage of evaluation for the GCRF. The contractors will develop a pathway to impact and evaluation framework for the GCRF as a whole, drawing on best practice. In doing so they will work closely with all the GCRF delivery partners and DfID and consult with other stakeholders, including members of the Strategic Advisory Group. The Foundation stage will include the overall theory of change and a process evaluation of the first year's calls.
- Once the foundation stage is completed and the evaluation approach is agreed, a further procurement exercise will take place to appoint a team to undertake the main evaluation work.

Recommendation 4: With the increase in investment in development research across the UK government, the responsible departments should develop a standing coordination body to clarify roles and responsibilities, avoid duplication and overlap, and facilitate exchange of learning.

Accept

- The newly established cross-Whitehall Strategic Coordination of Research (SCOR) Board, which is supported by the UK Collaborative on Development Research, will play a strong role in bringing greater strategic coherence to the Government's ODA research. It will be chaired by Professor Baron Peter Piot – Director of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and an internationally respected scientist with wide experience into some of the most pressing issues affecting developing countries.
- The SCOR Board will enable greater strategic coherence and coordination across all HMG ODA science and research funds and help ensure that GCRF is complementary to other Whitehall ODA research programmes, and that HMG funds deliver good quality research and value for money.

Other Findings

BEIS will consider all aspects of the ICAI report in detail and reply directly to ICAI with any further points to be pursued.