

# UK Strategy for the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF)



Cyngor Cyllido Addysg  
Uwch Cymru  
Higher Education Funding  
Council for Wales



# 1. Background

In November 2015 the UK government announced its new UK aid strategy to further the sustainable development and welfare of developing countries while placing international development at the heart of the UK's national security and foreign policy. The aid strategy is underpinned by a very clear guiding principle: 'that the UK's development spending will meet our moral obligation to the world's poorest and also support our national interest'<sup>1</sup>.

The aim of the Global Challenges Research Fund is "to ensure UK science takes the lead in addressing the problems faced by developing countries, whilst developing our ability to deliver cutting-edge research"<sup>2</sup>. Specifically, the GCRF will significantly increase research capacity and capability in the UK and in developing countries, and excellent research with impact. The ambition is to generate innovative solutions to intractable development issues and to identify practicable pathways to healthier and safer lives, sustainable development and prosperity for all, equal and effective education, social justice and human rights, and stable institutions. Drawing down £1.5 billion of Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding over 2016-2021, the GCRF will contribute to realising the ambitions of the UK aid strategy and to making progress on the global effort to address the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The internationally acknowledged strength of the UK's research base means that the UK is well placed to contribute meaningfully to the success of the **17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals<sup>3</sup> and associated 169 targets**. The SDGs embody a global commitment to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path to development, stimulating action over the next 15 years in areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet while eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions. The emphasis on interdisciplinarity and partnership building with developing countries that underpins the GCRF signals an ambition and an intention to achieve a positive transformational impact on development research and on sustainable global development, according to the standard understanding of the term 'sustainability'<sup>4</sup>.

The UK has recognised strengths in disciplinary and interdisciplinary research. At the same time, an increasing trend towards international collaboration has been demonstrated to promote research excellence<sup>5</sup>. The UK also has a robust system for supporting excellent research in open competition through peer review. The GCRF will build on these strengths, boosting research excellence, international partnerships (especially with developing countries) and research with impact, supported by transparent and rigorous

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-aid-tackling-global-challenges-in-the-national-interest](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-aid-tackling-global-challenges-in-the-national-interest)

<sup>2</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/publications/science-and-research-funding-allocation-2016-to-2020](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/science-and-research-funding-allocation-2016-to-2020)

<sup>3</sup> [www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/](http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/)

<sup>4</sup> A standard definition of sustainability is: 'The next generation can have access to the same opportunities for well-being as this one, assuming it behaves in the same way to those that follow. This includes physical, human, natural, social and other capital.'

<sup>5</sup> The Implications of International Research Collaboration for UK Universities: Research assessment, knowledge capacity and the knowledge economy. Jonathan Adams and Karen A Gurney. Digital Research Reports, February 2016

decision making processes for funding and spending. The GCRF delivery partners<sup>6</sup> will coordinate with one another, through a Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) and other mechanisms, to create complementary programmes that:

- promote **challenge-led** disciplinary and interdisciplinary research, including the participation of researchers who may not previously have considered the applicability of their work to development issues.
- **strengthen capacity** for research, innovation and knowledge exchange in the UK and developing countries through partnership with excellent UK research and researchers.
- provide an agile response to **emergencies** where there is an urgent research need.

The GCRF is a significant UK commitment that will require the GCRF delivery partners to work together to ensure coherence across the fund, value for money and to maximise impact. It will further require researchers from across the arts and humanities, social sciences, medical sciences, natural sciences and engineering to work across disciplines, and in partnership with colleagues in developing countries, to formulate new approaches and practical solutions to global development problems that are fit for purpose. Delivery partners will also work with other major funders of ODA research, including the Department for International Development (DFID), to ensure complementarity, sharing of best practice and value for money.

## 2. Research agenda for enabling change

The complex nature of global development means that solutions-focused research needs to be conducted across disciplines, drawing on the distinct contributions that each can make and encouraging truly original and transformative approaches to multidimensional challenges. The GCRF provides a unique opportunity to build a global community of researchers committed to sustainable development and the eradication of poverty. It complements, but also significantly expands and develops, other forms of international and multinational funding for development research, including governments, non-governmental bodies and foundations. The GCRF will allow UK research excellence to be deployed in a strategic way to generate solutions to the most significant and complex problems faced by developing countries while at the same time strengthening their research capability.

The UK already carries out world class research and is a world leader in international development. The three areas below provide an overarching framework, through the GCRF, for these two spheres to come together in a new way by increasing the scope and depth of research activities. They are a vision for change and not intended to constrain innovative approaches in other areas that also address these aims. The main areas are broadly consistent with the accepted notions of sustainability and are core to the SDGs.

---

<sup>6</sup> The GCRF delivery partners: Research Councils UK, Higher Education Funding Council for England, Scottish Funding Council, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, Department for Education Northern Ireland, Academy of Medical Sciences, Royal Society, British Academy, Royal Academy of Engineering and UK Space Agency

## **Equitable access to sustainable development**

Our vision is to create new knowledge and drive innovation that helps to ensure that everyone across the globe has access to:

- secure and resilient food systems supported by sustainable marine resources and agriculture
- sustainable health and well being
- inclusive and equitable quality education
- clean air, water and sanitation
- affordable, reliable, sustainable energy

## **Sustainable economies and societies**

The pace, nature and patterns of economic growth are threatening the future of its climate and eco-systems and are placing a major burden on the Earth's resources. At the same time populations are increasingly shifting from rural to urban areas. Each of the five challenge areas listed above must be placed in the context of the need to create prosperous economies and societies. There is also a need to understand and address the local and global challenges of population growth and pressure on the environment and climate, as well as new socio-economic models based on enabling technologies such as digital technologies. The GCRF will also encourage research and innovation that in the longer-term, builds:

- sustainable livelihoods supported by strong foundations for inclusive economic growth and innovation
- resilience and action on short-term environmental shocks and long-term environmental change
- sustainable cities and communities
- sustainable production and consumption of materials and other resources

## **Human rights, good governance and social justice**

It is increasingly recognised that development, human rights, good governance and social justice are indivisible. Developing an understanding of the institutions that embed and promote human rights, good governance and social justice - and the means to strengthen these - is paramount. Progress against the pursuit of the SDGs has been particularly challenging in fragile and conflict-affected states, while multiple refugee crises are applying mounting pressure in countries of origin, transit and destination. The GCRF will also support research and innovation that enables us to:

- understand and respond effectively to forced displacement and multiple refugee crises
- reduce conflict and promote peace, justice and humanitarian action
- reduce poverty and inequality, including gender inequalities.

The GCRF will support excellent research that addresses a significant problem or development challenge, directly contributing to the sustainable and inclusive prosperity of people in developing countries. However, the challenges facing societies and individuals across the globe are often complex, protracted and multi-faceted and cut across the three areas above. The GCRF is well placed to address these complex issues given the size of the fund, its challenge led approach and broad remit.

### 3. Investment strategy

The GCRF will support a diverse but balanced portfolio of activities with the common feature that they all in some way address the research agenda for enabling change and the SDGs, and, reflecting the BEIS ODA statement of intent, maximise the practical impact of research and innovation to improve the lives and opportunities of the global poor. Given the complexity and breadth of these challenges there is a need for the GCRF to take an integrated approach that includes a wide range of research and innovation, people and partnerships.

The GCRF delivery partners bring complementary skills and strengths in support of the research and higher education landscape within the UK and globally, and through the GCRF they will work together to support talented individuals and excellent research with impact within and across the following core criteria:

#### **Official Development Assistance (ODA) compliance**

All GCRF funding must be awarded in accordance with the OECD ODA guidelines<sup>7</sup>. That is, GCRF-funded research and innovation must promote the economic development and welfare of a developing country or countries as its primary objective. Common guidance on ODA eligibility has been established for GCRF research grants, and made available centrally through the delivery partners' websites<sup>8</sup>.

#### **Problem and solution focused**

The GCRF is aimed first and foremost at addressing global sustainable development challenges, and is intended to transform the lives of the worlds' poorest. The starting point for research and innovation funded through GCRF should therefore be a significant problem or development challenge. The extent to which partners in the Global South have played a leading role in problem identification and the design, definition, and development of the proposed approach forms an important part of this criterion as it will demonstrate relevance and also local appetite and capacity to implement solutions. Engagement with the Global South will help to ensure that the research and proposed impact match local needs and sensitivities. Successful proposals will need to demonstrate that they address the multiple dimensions of sustainability in an integrated way.

---

<sup>7</sup> [www.oecd.org/dac/stats/34086975.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/34086975.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/international/odaguidancercukspecific-pdf/](http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/international/odaguidancercukspecific-pdf/)

## **Research excellence**

Research excellence is a pre-requisite for impactful, transformative research. An underlying assumption behind the GCRF is that new perspectives, not constrained by traditional methodologies or disciplinary silos, are needed to address these challenges. The GCRF will encourage new research communities and learning alliances to be brought together to conduct excellent research with impact. This will bring new and valuable insights and contribute to a step change to existing knowledge and approaches that address development challenges. Southern partners, including policy makers and practitioners, as well as researchers, will be expected to play an important role in research design and planning for implementation and uptake.

## **Impact**

Through excellent research with impact, knowledge exchange and innovation the GCRF aims to make a substantial contribution to improved social welfare, economic development, and environmental sustainability in developing countries. Impact could take the form of, for instance, creating the knowledge to bolster communities' resilience to environmental and human-made challenges, such as climate change, epidemics, conflict, and other emergencies. Other impacts could be generated by providing a stronger evidence base for sustainable development policy and practice and helping both donor and recipient governments to spend limited resources wisely. Alternatively, impact may come from encouraging the effective use of knowledge, technology and innovation to create opportunities for economic development, community and business engagement, leading to new and improved, processes, services and business models. The GCRF will support those activities that can demonstrate that they have the strongest potential for impact, recognising that research outcomes can be difficult to predict and pathways to impact can be complicated.

## **Capacity building and partnership**

The GCRF aims to build UK and global development research capacity and capability by forging strong and enduring partnerships between academic communities in the UK and the Global South and by enhancing the research and innovation capacity of both. This requires strong networks to be built involving researchers, policy makers, and practitioners, plus the involvement of civil society and the private sector. Capacity building and networking of researchers in the UK and the Global South will make it possible to initiate research that is more relevant to practice and policy, and to bring innovations with an impact on development swiftly into the market. The GCRF will encourage the development of new approaches and ways of working across conventional boundaries that will deliver capacity building and partnership in a sustainable way. GCRF will ensure that researchers within developing countries are able to access funding to support partnerships on an equitable basis that is consistent with the UK commitment to untied aid.

## **Agile response to emergencies**

Emergencies and disasters can have a devastating impact on developing countries. The GCRF will support research that is urgent and vital to emergency and disaster response in developing countries and that can contribute important evidence to the humanitarian and policy responses to such emergencies.

## 4. Geographic scope

The GCRF will focus on challenges that are manifest within countries on the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) list<sup>9</sup>. The GCRF will not give priority to individual countries, but will support UK universities and research organisations in undertaking challenge-led research where it can add greatest value and has the greatest potential for impact. Delivery partners will therefore have oversight of the portfolio to ensure that, in line with the UK aid strategy, the potential for impact on countries where development challenges are most acute is realised. While it is not a requirement, the GCRF may support bilateral or multilateral programmes with partners in other countries. GCRF will complement rather than duplicate activities that are most appropriately supported under the Newton Fund and other ODA initiatives.

The OECD DAC List Least Developed Countries and Other Low Income Countries are by definition the poorest countries, where the development challenges are often the most significant. These countries often have the weakest and most fragile institutions, and limited resources to support research. They could benefit from UK collaboration supported through the GCRF, as they are unlikely to have the capability and resource needed for consideration as a Newton Fund partner.

OECD DAC Lower Middle and Upper Middle Income Countries include a group of countries with a wide range in levels of gross national income (GNI) per capita, and a diverse range of challenges. Partners from Middle Income Countries are more able to contribute towards collaborative research programmes, commensurate with their own resources. The Newton Fund has focused on a number of Middle Income Countries<sup>10</sup>, and complementarity between the two Funds will be ensured through the established governance structure of the GCRF. The GCRF could provide an opportunity to strengthen and reinforce established Newton Fund partnerships, where these align with GCRF objectives.

The GCRF will encourage high-quality partnerships in order to tackle the challenges faced by developing countries; in cases where this includes expertise in countries outside of the DAC list, these partners would be expected to contribute resources as appropriate.

The Commonwealth includes countries within all the DAC's development classifications and offers a framework for working across a quite diverse set of countries. There is scope to work with established Commonwealth institutions in order to strengthen collaboration, multinational alignment and impact and to build on delivery partners' existing relationships with organisations in these countries.

---

<sup>9</sup> The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) regularly analyses the economic status of developing countries and publishes the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) list, a list of countries and territories eligible to receive Official Development Assistance (ODA): [www.oecd.org/dac/stats/daclist.htm](http://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/daclist.htm)

<sup>10</sup> Current Newton Fund Partner Countries (August 2016): Brazil, Chile, China, Colombia, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Malaysia, Mexico, Philippines, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, Vietnam. [www.newtonfund.ac.uk/](http://www.newtonfund.ac.uk/)

## 5. Risks to successful GCRF implementation

The GCRF is a major UK government investment in development research and a significant ODA commitment. Risks to its successful implementation include:

- lack of buy-in from the communities that need to be mobilised to realise its ambitions, including researchers and non-academic partners in the UK and in the Global South
- poor coordination between delivery partners, leading to duplication of efforts rather than complementarity
- a lack of active portfolio management, meaning that GCRF funds a series of discrete projects rather than a coherent set of responses to specific challenges
- failures of governance, monitoring, evaluation, reporting and/or communications, meaning that confidence in the ODA compliance, value for money and/or effectiveness of the GCRF as a whole is eroded
- failure to create real impact in developing countries

The following sections outline steps to mitigate these risks.

## 6. International partnerships

Partnerships are vital for impact at the project level, and there is also significant opportunity for the GCRF to add value through working in partnership at a strategic level with other international development organisations and agencies. The GCRF will look to develop strategic relationships with key partner organisations in developed and developing countries, to ensure complementarity and avoid duplication, and explore, where appropriate, opportunities for joint or aligned activities. These partners include other UK and multinational, public and philanthropic organisations, and the delivery partners' global network of peer organisations; including National Academies, RCUK overseas offices, the Science and Innovation Network (SIN) and DFID in-country offices. Joint activities might range from initiatives to address specific challenges, to grow particular capabilities, or to secure further third-party investment and avoid duplication.

Engaging with these organisations will ensure that the GCRF reflects the experience of other funders, and identifies where it can make a distinctive contribution. For instance the UK is regarded internationally as a thought leader in both ODA and the contribution from research. In 2014 the OECD Peer Review Report on the UK<sup>11</sup> stated that “the UK continues to lead the global development agenda”. However, there is scope to explore and learn from the different approaches and practices used by international comparator organisations.

---

<sup>11</sup> OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: United Kingdom 2014, [www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/development/oecd-development-co-operation-peer-reviews-united-kingdom-2014\\_9789264226579-en#page1](http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/development/oecd-development-co-operation-peer-reviews-united-kingdom-2014_9789264226579-en#page1)



The GCRF will also engage with other UK ODA initiatives including the Newton Fund, the Ross Fund and the Prosperity Fund to ensure complementarity and to benefit from established networks. The strategic relationship with the DFID will help ensure that there is alignment between UK initiatives; DFID is a major funder of ODA research whom GCRF will engage with as a key partner to ensure learning, as well as an enabler for impact; and facilitator for relationships with other partners within the UK and overseas.

## 7. Demonstrating international best practice

The success of the GCRF will be measured by the government in terms of:

- Maximising impact on the wellbeing of people in developing countries, in line with the UK aid strategy objectives
- Maximising impact on UK research
- Operating in the most cost-effective way possible

Portfolio monitoring, evaluation, impact assessment and comparator studies will be used to meet the following requirement of the UK aid strategy: *“All departments spending ODA will be required to put in place a clear plan to ensure that their programme design, quality assurance, approval, contracting and procurement, monitoring, reporting and evaluation processes represent international best practice”*.

The GCRF portfolio will be actively managed by individual delivery partners, with cross-cutting oversight through the GCRF Strategic Advisory Group (SAG). The GCRF delivery partners will use the core criteria to assist in tracking the nature and diversity of the challenges being addressed, the geographic impact of these challenges and disciplinary/interdisciplinary contributions. Impact will often depend upon action by non-UK and/or non-research organisations and particular attention will be given to the extent and nature of collaboration/partnership within the portfolio. Portfolio monitoring will seek to identify gaps or shortfall within the portfolio to inform future strategy refinement. It will also underpin formal reporting on ODA to the OECD via the Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS). Furthermore, portfolio monitoring will create an evidence base for future exercise, for example the next Spending Review.

The delivery partners will continue to strengthen the peer review community in order to effectively assess GCRF activities against the core criteria. This involves finding a balance between academic and non-academic expertise, including informed input from policy and practitioners. The GCRF will establish a more supportive environment for the assessment of interdisciplinary and transformative research proposals, in line with the recommendations of the Nurse Review<sup>12</sup>.

Evaluation of ODA relevant research can have particular difficulties due to the separation of research and impact through extended distance, and differences in jurisdiction, culture and language. The orientation of GCRF research and innovation towards explicit problems

---

<sup>12</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/publications/nurse-review-of-research-councils-recommendations](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nurse-review-of-research-councils-recommendations)

/ opportunities lends itself to a theory of change approach which helps to overcome some of the difficulties associated with research evaluation and impact assessment. This will build upon: the core criteria and recent best practice including evaluations of the Newton Fund, DFID programmes and DFID-delivery partner partnerships. Evaluation will be used to develop a richer understanding of 'what works', in order to improve programme design and implementation and ultimately maximise the global impact of research.

## 8. Governance

The governance of the GCRF will be managed across the delivery partners, with strategic oversight from the BEIS ODA Board, to be chaired by the Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation. The Board will, amongst other responsibilities hold delivery partners to account, oversee plans for evaluation, and engage with other groups in government on ODA funding.

Independent external advice on the strategic direction of the GCRF will come from the GCRF Strategic Advisory Group (SAG), with membership decided through an open nomination process. The primary purpose of the SAG is to advise on the strategic development of the GCRF, including; engagement with research and stakeholder communities, the facilitation of new ideas and opportunities, and the development of a strategic research agenda. Each delivery partner will have put in place internal governance mechanisms for monitoring and assurance. A GCRF Delivery Forum will support integration and co-ordination across and between delivery partners, and with the SAG.

The delivery partners bring complementary expertise to the GCRF; for example the UK Higher Education Funding Councils support the early development and nurturing of research and stakeholder partnerships, and can deploy this both flexibly and rapidly; the National Academies bring expertise in seeking and supporting talented individuals, and the Research Councils have experience in research programmes covering all academic disciplines; and the UK Space Agency contributes to the innovation aspects of GCRF.

The governance structure may need to be revised in light of the changes to the research funding landscape, including the introduction of UK Research and Innovation.



© Crown copyright 2017

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit [nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3](http://nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3) or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: [psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk). Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

This publication available from [www.gov.uk/beis](http://www.gov.uk/beis)

Contact us if you have any enquiries about this publication, including requests for alternative formats, at:

Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy  
1 Victoria Street  
London SW1H 0ET  
Tel: 020 7215 5000

Email: [enquiries@beis.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@beis.gov.uk)