



Department for  
Business, Energy  
& Industrial Strategy

# Stage 1a: Review of Management Processes

Evaluation of the Global Challenges Research Fund

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## **Disclaimer**

The views expressed in this report are those of the evaluators. They do not represent those of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), UKRI or of any of the individuals and organisations referred to in the report.

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# Contents

List of acronyms	vii
Executive Summary	x
1. Introduction	1
1.1 Strategic and policy context for the GCRF Management Review in 2020–21	3
1.2 Findings of previous assessments of GCRF	4
1.3 Structure of the report	6
2. Methodology and approach	7
2.1 Overview of approach	7
2.2 Overview of how we collected data	10
2.3 Overview of how we developed our analysis	12
2.4 Strengths and limitations of the approach we adopted	13
Strengths	13
Limitations	14
3. Results	15
3.1 Strategy	15
3.2 GCRF has acquired greater strategic direction but there remains a lack of clarity about the intended routes to development impact	16
3.3 UKRI has an important role to play in supporting GCRF strategy, and this has both benefits and drawbacks	21
3.4 The ways in which Fund-level strategy influences strategic approaches at the DP and programme levels varies, mostly reflecting prior ways of working	22
3.5 Collaboration with Southern partners has gained greater emphasis within GCRF strategy; it is still patchy, but there are important and creative efforts that can be built upon	24
3.6 There are signs of strategic agility in response to Covid-19	25
4. Processes	27
4.1 Good governance requires good processes	28
4.2 GCRF processes at DP and programme levels build strongly on existing funding mechanisms but funders have moved to adapt processes to reinforce ‘ODA excellence’	29
4.3 Involvement of Southern voices in funding processes and decision making is now commonplace across much of the Fund, creating opportunities for cross-funder learning and tighter links between strategy and process	29

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4.4 Stakeholders are aware that working with existing North–South networks weakens efforts to achieve greater equity; however, addressing these processes can be challenging _____	31
4.5 Funding timelines and uncertainties impact on the ability of GCRF to deliver efficiently and effectively _____	33
4.6 Processes for allocating funding are often limited to UK-based PIs. This has implications for equity. _____	34
4.7 There is a need to move from multiple (often good) processes to greater Fund-wide coherence _____	35
5. Monitoring, evaluation and learning _____	37
5.1 Monitoring and evaluation processes are in place across different levels, but it is not always clear how they contribute to learning and adaptation _____	37
5.2 Data collection approaches differ across DPs and programmes, creating challenges in portfolio-level oversight and sharing insights _____	40
6. Value for Money _____	44
6.1 GCRF faces challenges in assessing Value for Money, reflecting common issues for both development and R&I portfolios; a suitable short-term response is to focus on cost control and efficiency while focusing in the medium term on effectiveness and impact _____	45
6.2 Interviewees were aware of the importance of value for money but do not have a structured and aligned approach to follow; a helpful place to start would be to focus on efficiency _____	47
6.3 Good examples of minimising costs without compromising quality exist but are unevenly spread across the Fund _____	49
6.4 GCRF is effective at identifying (anticipated) direct project outputs; identifying and measuring capacity building and transformational innovations should be a medium-term aspiration _____	49
6.5 Ensuring equitability through fairness to Global South researchers is not adequately supported by current ways of working _____	50
7. Lessons from comparator funds _____	52
7.1 Details of comparator funds reviewed _____	53
7.2 Research funds requiring a level of coherence use a fixed but adaptable strategic framework _____	56
7.3 There are different approaches to including the review of development impact in the proposal assessment _____	57
7.4 Bringing together different actors helps foster relationships and communities, in the UK and internationally _____	58

7.5 Flexible or tailored approaches to M&E can be used to reflect the diversity and differential resourcing of different aspects of a fund's portfolio _____	59
7.6 There are different ways that funds can adapt and learn from experience _____	60
7.7 Timeliness of funding is a common challenge for UK research funds _____	61
8. Conclusions _____	62
8.1 Key conclusions _____	62
8.1.1 Strategy: How is strategic leadership addressed in GCRF and to what extent does it cascade through the Fund to provide a consistent focus on development impact to realise the Fund's aims and purpose? _____	62
8.1.2 Processes: How do processes work and how do these support the delivery of ODA excellence in line with aims and strategy? _____	64
8.1.3 Monitoring, evaluation and learning: To what extent does M&E drive learning and to what extent is information available to support effective decision making? _____	65
8.1.4 Value for money: To what extent are systems in place to support and help manage the delivery of value for money? _____	66
9. Recommendations _____	68
1. Establish clearer lines of responsibility: _____	68
2. Increase and deepen Southern engagement in the operation of the Fund: _____	68
3. Strengthen the emphasis on development outcomes alongside research excellence: _____	68
4. Improve data systems to enable strategic analysis and improvement: _____	69
5. Build closer working relationships between DPs to facilitate learning and increase coherence within the portfolio: _____	70
6. Define, socialise and resource an approach to VfM across the portfolio, establishing why it matters and how it can be effectively implemented: _____	71
10. Implications for Stage 1b of the evaluation _____	72
10.1 Implications for future Value for Money assessment modules _____	72
References _____	74
Annex A _____	76
Interview protocols _____	76
Annex B _____	77
Methods note _____	77

# List of acronyms

AAS	African Academy of Sciences
ACEIR	African Centre of Excellence for Inequalities Research
AHRC	Arts and Humanities Research Centre
AMS	Academy of Medical Sciences
ARUA	African Research Universities Alliance
BBSRC	Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council
BEIS	Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (formerly BIS)
Covid-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CRAIG	Cross-Academy Implementation Group
CSSF	Conflict, Security and Stability Fund
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (OECD)
DFID	Department for International Development
DHF	Dorothy Hodgkin Fellowships
DLG	Delivery and Learning Group
DP	Delivery Partner
EOI	Expression of Interest
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
FEO	Federation of African Engineering Organisations
FIC	Fund for International Collaboration
FLAIR	Future Leaders – African Independent Research
FMAP	Forestry Management and Protection
GCRF	Global Challenges Research Fund
GHG	Global Health Group
HEI	Higher Education Institution

HEP SSA	Higher Education Partnerships in sub-Saharan Africa Programme
IATI	International Aid Transparency Initiative
ICA	International Collaboration Award
ICAI	Independent Commission for Aid Impact
IDAG	International Development Advisory Group
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
IPP	International Partnership Programme
JFU	Joint Funds Unit
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LMIC	Low and Middle-Income Countries
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MRC	Medical Research Council
NAO	National Audit Office
NCD	Non-Communicable Disease
NERC	Natural Environment Research Council
NFC	National Funding Councils
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NOMA	Norad's Programme for Master Studies
Norad	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
NORHED	Norwegian Programme for Capacity Development in Higher Education and Research for Development
NPIF	National Productivity Investment Fund
NUFU	Norwegian Programme for Development Research and Education
ODA	Official Development Assistance
ODART	ODA Reporting Tool
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSF	Open Society Foundation



PI	Principal Investigator
POMB	Portfolio, Operations and Management Board
PSRE	Public Sector Research Establishment
QR	Quality-Related
R&D	Research and Development
R&I	Research and Innovation
R4d	Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for Development
RAG	Red-Amber-Green Rating System
RC	Research Council
RCUK	Research Councils UK
RODA	Reporting Official Development Assistance
RS	Royal Society
SAG	Strategic Advisory Group
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SFC	Scottish Funding Council
SIU	Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Higher Education
SNSF	Swiss National Science Foundation
SPF	Strategic Priorities Fund
STFC	Science and Technology Facilities Council
ToC	Theory of Change
UKCDR	UK Collaborative on Development Research
UKRI	UK Research and Innovation
UKSA	UK Space Agency
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
URF	University Research Fellowship
VfM	Value for Money

# Executive Summary

*The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) is a five-year £1.5 billion fund announced by the UK government in late 2015 to support cutting-edge research that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries. GCRF forms part of the UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA) commitment and contributes to the achievement of the UK's 2015 Aid Strategy's goals.*

It ensures that UK science takes a leading role in addressing the challenges faced by developing countries while also developing the UK's ability to deliver cutting-edge research and innovation (R&I) for sustainable development. GCRF is implemented by 17 of the UK's research and innovation funders, which commission R&I as delivery partners (DPs)<sup>1</sup>.

The overall purpose of the GCRF evaluation is to assess the extent to which GCRF has achieved its objectives and contributed to its intended impacts. The evaluation will be conducted over five years and across three stages. This first stage – stage 1a – consists of four modules<sup>2</sup> conducted in parallel that aim to explore the activities conducted by GCRF implementing partners, both BEIS (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy) and DPs, and the extent to which these position the Fund to deliver on its intended aims and commitments. Stage 1a was carried out between April 2020-March 2021. This report sets out the findings of one of those four modules: the Management Review. The aim of the Management Review is to analyse the strategy, processes and monitoring, evaluation and learning within GCRF, establish the extent to which the Fund is coherent and well-managed, and to identify ways in which management of the Fund could be improved. We conducted analysis at the Fund level, and in detail for a sample of 5 DPs, 8 programmes, and for 6 comparator funds beyond GCRF. We collected evidence through desk research and a programme of 118 interviews with those involved in Fund management at GCRF and the comparator funds between August 2020 and January 2021. Based on the evidence collected we addressed four key evaluation questions as follows:

**Strategy:** How is strategic leadership addressed in GCRF and to what extent does it cascade through the Fund to provide a consistent focus on development impact to realise the Fund's aims and purpose?

- GCRF still retains a largely decentralised model with Fund-level strategy offering a 'frame' against which DPs and programmes can align work that leverages their

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<sup>1</sup> The 17 Delivery Partners for GCRF include: UKRI (Arts and Humanities research Council, Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, Economic and Social Research Council, Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, Medical research Council, Natural Environment Research Council, Science and Technology Facilities Council, and Innovate UK and Research England); Scottish Funding Council, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales; Department for the Economy Northern Ireland; British Academy; Royal academy; Royal Academy of Engineering; UK Space Agency.

<sup>2</sup> The four modules were the management review, reported here, and three further modules focusing on relevance and coherence; gender, poverty and social inclusion, and fairness. The other three modules are reported in a separate document.

strengths. This facilitates agility and allows ‘on the ground’ knowledge to inform programme design but also risks a lack of focus and coherence within the portfolio.

- Challenge Leaders and refinement of Challenge Areas are included in the Fund to provide additional structure and oversight. Perceptions of the effectiveness of this Challenge leadership are mixed. The Challenge Leaders have taken actions to improve the coherence of the portfolio. Barriers remain, however, to the effectiveness of the Challenge Leader model due to a lack of consistent data and information on the portfolio, and inherent silos within the portfolio. This is exacerbated by limited opportunities for collaboration between UKRI DPs, and the Academies.
- Southern stakeholder engagement in strategy development is currently limited but has been recently increasing, such as within funding processes. This should be built upon.
- Ownership of the GCRF strategy was not always clear to our interviewees, or through the documentation. It is clear that BEIS is more than ‘just’ a funder, and Delivery Partners (DPs) do more than merely implement a strategy. This creates a positive sense of shared leadership and responsibility, but it also leaves gaps in relation to clarity on responsibility for driving forward priorities. There have been recent actions to improve strategic oversight.

**Processes:** How do processes work and to what extent do these support the delivery of ODA excellence in line with aims and strategy?

- There are strong processes in place to assure ODA compliance requirements and R&I excellence. To fully deliver on the Fund’s aims and strategy, however, there will be a need to move beyond compliance towards ‘excellence’ in the way development outcomes and needs are addressed in GCRF – with ‘ODA excellence’ receiving as much focus as is currently placed on ‘R&I excellence’.
- GCRF processes at the DP and programme levels build strongly on existing funding mechanisms which are well-established and designed to support excellent R&I. However, adaptations have been made to these approaches to ensure that they can also deliver on development outcomes.
- One key development has been an increased involvement of Southern stakeholders in funding processes; however, the extent of engagement varies across the Fund, from advisory to decision-making roles.

- The pattern of funding is concentrated in middle-income countries and in more established research institutions. This is due to reliance on existing networks in some cases, and due to the assessment for funding based on research excellence. There is less focus on development outcomes or geographic distribution. Comparator funds illustrate how these wider considerations can be built into funding assessment, for example using frameworks such as RQ+ (Research Quality Plus).
- Funding timelines have an impact on the ability of GCRF to plan over the longer term and hence deliver effectively and efficiently. Some aspects of this might, however, be outside the control of the Fund itself.

**Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL):** To what extent does monitoring and evaluation (M&E) drive learning and to what extent is information available to support effective decision making?

- Reflecting the need to show ODA compliance, comprehensive M&E processes are in place across the Fund, but there are limited examples at the time of writing of these moving beyond accountability to deliver learning.
- One of the challenges in monitoring and learning across the Fund is a lack of good quality, consistent and accessible evidence at the Fund level. This stems from the differences in scale, capacity and legacy data collection systems across the DPs, alongside the diversity of the portfolio itself. Efforts are being made to address this through the implementation of the ODA Reporting Tool (ODART) system and the development of key performance indicators (KPIs).
- More effective engagement of DPs in the provision of data could be facilitated by ensuring the purpose of these activities is clearly articulated and requests continue to be mindful of the different resourcing of the different DPs. Learning could be better supported not just by better data but by closer working relationships between DPs outside the UKRI and Academy silos.

**Value for Money (VfM):** To what extent are systems in place to support and help manage the delivery of value for money?

- Work has been ongoing to develop and roll out a Fund-wide framework for VfM. This is welcome, as a lack of a clear Fund-wide approach has limited the scope for cross-Fund learning and led to variable practice. A common, Fund-wide framework structured around the four Es (Economy, Efficiency, Effectiveness and Equity) – but that retains flexibility to reflect the Fund's diversity – will enable communication, learning and consistency.
- Increased understanding is needed across the Fund of the interrelation between VfM and the delivery of high-quality research and addressing the Fund's aims. Alongside this, increased capacity is needed to assess and deliver VfM. There is indeed a role for the GCRF evaluation in fulfilling these goals, with VfM outputs starting in 2021.

Based on these findings, we identify six key recommendations to improve the management of GCRF:

**1. Establish clearer lines of responsibility:** Based on analysis of interviews and documentation, it was not clear who 'owns' GCRF. BEIS is more than 'just' a funder and DPs (and especially UKRI) do more than 'just' implement. This creates a positive sense of distributed leadership and shared responsibilities, but it has also led to a perceived lack of clear direction over, for example, MEL, VfM and creation of a balanced portfolio. We are starting to see action being taken on some of these issues, notably MEL and VfM. GCRF/BEIS is best placed to establish greater clarity in these respects (and indeed is already beginning to do so). A useful step would be to map current lines of responsibility and identify any gaps, ensuring clear accountability processes are in place across different aspects of the Fund.

**2. Increase and deepen Southern engagement in the operation of the Fund:** We have seen increased involvement of Southern voices in funding processes in line with the Fund's strategy. This engagement should be extended and deepened to include a fuller involvement in strategy and funding decisions across the Fund. A useful first step would be to work closely with DPs to establish a baseline on what is already happening, so progress can be measured, and to share and learn from existing good practice.

**3. Strengthen the emphasis on development outcomes alongside research excellence:** Mechanisms should be put in place to ensure development outcomes are central to funding decisions and wider Fund-level activities and design, and that clear lines of accountability for those development outcomes are in place. One route to support this would be the adoption of an explicit, Fund-wide model for the assessment of development outcomes in proposal review, and the growth of Southern involvement in funding processes can help reinforce this. Alongside this, funding should be earmarked for researcher training; helping those from non-traditional development backgrounds to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to work effectively and sensitively in a development context and deliver ODA excellence could offer significant benefits in terms of both process and outcomes.

**4. Improve data systems to enable strategic analysis and improvement:** The development of ODART provides an opportunity to overhaul the Fund's patchy and difficult-to-navigate data architecture. This opportunity should be taken to develop a 'one-stop shop' for information on GCRF accessible across and outside the Fund to support coordination and learning. Consideration should also be given to where other M&E requirements and data collection can be further streamlined. M&E requirements could be tailored to the diversity and different levels of resourcing of different aspects of the portfolio. However, DPs have M&E systems that pre-date GCRF and have other purposes. Where GCRF brings particular requirements (for example, to meet ODA obligations) that may seem burdensome, the reasons for this and the responsibilities and requirements of ODA funding should be carefully communicated to DPs by BEIS.

**5. Build closer working relationships between DPs to facilitate learning and increase coherence within the portfolio:** There is evidence that there can be a lack of coordination

and knowledge across DPs within the GCRF portfolio and evidence from this review suggests that working together is important to creating effective relationships across DPs. Resources should therefore be allocated specifically to support and enable collaboration between all DPs. Alongside this, efforts should continue to promote greater alignment of the Fund with global challenges. More responsive data systems would enable ongoing review and refinement of this strategy and 'course correction' where needed.

**6. Define, socialise and resource an approach to VfM across the portfolio, establishing why it matters and how it can be effectively implemented:** An overarching VfM approach at the Fund level is in development, which will be an important step. This will be based on the four Es (economy, efficiency, effectiveness and equity), and should allow for contextualised approaches for different DPs and projects. This should be communicated and socialised across GCRF, demonstrating what this means for the work that people do within the Fund, and also establishing a focus on VfM as a priority alongside the quality of research and the impact on development. Funding should also be committed to support training on VfM in the context of GCRF, building capacity to engage and deliver across the Fund. There are opportunities to identify good practices in managing and measuring value for money that BEIS should ensure are a routine part of GCRF processes.

# 1. Introduction

*This is the GCRF Management Review report, one of four modules in the GCRF Evaluation, Stage 1a.*

Stage 1a assesses GCRF's core commissioning and management functions – the activity level in the Theory of Change – via four modules that focus on management, relevance and targeting, fairness and the integration of gender, social inclusion and poverty as core concerns in the Fund. The aim is to provide a learning (formative) assessment to ensure that the conditions are in place to support GCRF's outcomes and impact. Stage 1a will produce an in-depth view of how GCRF works as a fund, where it is working well and where it could be improved. Box 1 provides an overview of the GCRF Evaluation.

**The aim of the Management Review is to analyse the strategy, processes and monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) within GCRF, and make an initial review of value for money (VfM) within the Fund.** The Management Review addresses four sub-evaluation questions (EQs) as follows:

- How is strategic leadership addressed in GCRF and to what extent does it cascade through the Fund to provide a consistent focus on development impact to realise the Fund's aims and purpose?
- How do processes work and to what extent do these support the delivery of ODA excellence in line with aims and strategy?
- To what extent does M&E drive learning and to what extent is information available to support effective decision making?
- To what extent are systems in place to support and help manage the delivery of value for money?

The Management Review and the other three modules together contribute to addressing Stage 1a's main evaluation question (MEQ) 1: 'Is the GCRF relevant, coherent, well-targeted, fair, gender-sensitive, socially inclusive and well-managed?'

## **Box 1. Overview of GCRF and the evaluation**

**The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) is a £1.5 billion fund announced by the UK government in late 2015 to support cutting-edge research that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries.** GCRF forms part of the UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA) commitment and contributes to the achievement of the UK's 2015 aid strategy's goals. It ensures that UK science takes a leading role in addressing the challenges faced by developing countries while also developing the UK's ability to deliver cutting-edge research and innovation (R&I) for sustainable development.

GCRF is overseen by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and implemented by 17 of the UK's research and innovation (R&I) funders, which lead on commissioning R&I to address development challenges<sup>3</sup>. GCRF-funded teams in the UK, partner with organisations in the Global South to deliver interdisciplinary R&I on a wide range of urgent issues, from health and well-being to peace and justice, alongside agile responses to global crises like Covid-19.

The purpose of GCRF's evaluation is to assess the extent to which GCRF has contributed to its objectives and impact. This has a dual learning and accountability purpose, as clearly set out in the evaluation objectives:

- To assess whether the Fund is achieving its aims (accountability).
- To assess whether it is on course to achieve impact (accountability).
- To support BEIS in their development of a cross-fund and Fund-specific Key Performance Indicator (KPI) framework to provide a robust measure of the Fund's impact and Value for Money (VfM) (learning and accountability).
- To provide evidence of what works and make interim assessments of value for money to feed into GCRF learning loops to improve the Fund while it is in operation (learning and accountability).
- To inform the design of a VfM case for future funds (learning).

As the evaluation has both accountability and learning functions, it will provide evidence of GCRF's contribution towards impact and engage with BEIS's developing processes for learning about aid effectiveness.

**Given the complexity of the Fund, the evaluation is designed in three stages from 2020 to 2024.** The evaluation design was developed under the earlier Foundation Stage evaluation carried out in 2017–18.<sup>4</sup> It addresses the purpose through five Main Evaluation Questions (MEQs) and a three-stage design that tracks GCRF's Theory of Change (ToC) from activities to impact over five years. Each stage applies specific modules to focus on different aspects of the ToC and the Fund. Stage 1a of the evaluation runs from May 2020 to February 2021. The first stage – Stage 1a – consists of four modules conducted in parallel that aim to understand how BEIS and GCRF's delivery partners (DPs) manage and position the Fund to deliver on its intended aims and commitments. These four modules focus on GCRF's management, relevance and targeting, fairness and the integration of gender, social inclusion and poverty in the Fund's commissioning and processes.

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<sup>3</sup> The 17 Delivery Partners for GCRF include: UKRI (Arts and Humanities research Council, Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, Economic and Social Research Council, Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, Medical research Council, Natural Environment Research Council, Science and Technology Facilities Council, and Innovate UK and Research England); Scottish Funding Council, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales; Department for the Economy Northern Ireland; British Academy; Royal academy; Royal Academy of Engineering; UK Space Agency.

<sup>4</sup> GCRF, 2018. *GCRF Evaluation Foundation Stage*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-challenges-research-fund-gcrf-foundation-stage-evaluation>



## 1.1 Strategic and policy context for the GCRF Management Review in 2020–21

**In 2020, the evaluation's Inception Report outlined the changing strategic and policy context for GCRF,<sup>5</sup> changes which will accelerate in 2021.** Since GCRF started in 2015, the national policy discourse on Official Development Assistance (ODA) has been evolving. Several significant changes have taken place since 2020, with the implications for GCRF still emerging.

First, in February 2020, the UK government announced the Integrated Review of foreign policy, defence, security and international development.<sup>6</sup> This review covers all aspects of the UK's place in the world, from the role of the diplomatic service and approach to international development to the capabilities of the armed forces and security agencies. The vision presented is to achieve influence in an increasingly complex world by bringing together all of the UK's national assets in a coherent, fused approach.<sup>7</sup> A key strand of that vision is the role of science and technology as an integral element of national security and international policy, supported by an open perspective towards international cooperation, and a focus on offering leadership in global challenges including poverty reduction<sup>8</sup>.

Second, the merger in August 2020 of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) and DFID into the new Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) is expected to be central to the delivery of this emerging vision. It is anticipated that the broad view of national interest will be based on values (e.g. open societies and democratic values), as much as it is on the UK's core interests of security and prosperity. In November 2020, the Foreign Secretary announced a new strategic framework for Official Development Assistance (ODA) that will replace the UK government's 2015 aid strategy.<sup>9</sup> The framework notes the lack of 'coherence, oversight or appropriate accountability across Whitehall' for aid spending. The new framework sets out a range of measures to deliver better outcomes, including focusing aid on seven global challenges, focusing on countries where the UK's development, security and economic interests align, and increased oversight by FCDO of ODA allocations to other departments. Programmes will be judged by fit with the UK's strategic objectives, evidence of impact achieved and value for money.<sup>10</sup>

Alongside strengthened FCDO oversight of ODA spend and the Integrated Review, the Covid-19 pandemic is also likely to influence broader policy changes taking place to ODA spending

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<sup>5</sup> Itad/Rand, August 2020 [unpublished]. *GCRF Evaluation, Inception Report*.

<sup>6</sup> Prime Minister's Office, 2020. 'PM outlines new review to define Britain's place in the world' [press release]. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-outlines-new-review-to-define-britains-place-in-the-world>

<sup>7</sup> This may be influenced by the fusion doctrine. HMG, 2018. *National Security Capability Review, March 2015*. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/705347/6.4391\\_CO\\_National-Security-Review\\_web.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/705347/6.4391_CO_National-Security-Review_web.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-integrated-review-2021>

<sup>9</sup> Devex, 25 November 2020. 'UK aid to refocus on countries where 'interests align''. Available at: <https://www.devex.com/news/uk-aid-to-refocus-on-countries-where-interests-align-98648>

<sup>10</sup> Letter from the Foreign Secretary to the Chair, International Development Committee, 2 December 2020. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/3683/documents/38142/default/>

and management – and perhaps more so than any other factor at any time in the last 30 years. The economic recession and resultant fiscal policies have affected the Spending Review that was carried out in autumn 2020, limited to a one-year timeframe and featuring a reduction in the ODA commitment from 0.7% to 0.5 % of GNI.<sup>11</sup> New legislation is planned to reconcile this decision with the 2015 International Development Act, but it is not clear how this will relate to the 2002 International Development Act, which binds UK aid to make a ‘contribution to a reduction in poverty’.<sup>12</sup> The implications of this for GCRF funding are still working their way through at the time of writing.

In the research sector, the formation of UK Research and Innovation, known as UKRI, in 2018 brought a shift in how the nine Research Councils operate. UKRI was created to strengthen cross-disciplinary research and collaboration. UKRI’s international development team provides central leadership and capability on GCRF strategic management and evaluation functions, managing many of GCRF’s large investments centrally from the International Development (ID) team, in collaboration with the individual Research Councils (RCs). GCRF’s overall Fund management function, while part of BEIS, is also hosted within UKRI, creating a centre of gravity for international development research.

In 2020 in the research sector Covid-19 has had an impact on research institutions and especially universities, both in terms of budgets<sup>13</sup> and capability. This will not only affect the delivery of the evaluation, but also change the strategic context where the purpose of GCRF may be modified – and indeed we have seen a direct response to Covid-19 within GCRF as set out further below.

Taken together, this shifting context is likely to have significant impacts on GCRF’s strategic role, funding and objectives during the evaluation period of 2020-24. The evaluation is sufficiently flexible to explore these effects through its stages and modules.

## 1.2 Findings of previous assessments of GCRF

**Against the backdrop of this rapidly shifting aid policy context, the Management Review builds on two Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) reviews and the Foundation Evaluation of GCRF, carried out since the Fund launched in 2016.** These reviews have highlighted rapid progress made by the GCRF and the expansion of UK ambition in research for development, but also noted several persistent weaknesses in GCRF’s strategy, governance and management processes.

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<sup>11</sup> House of Commons Library, 26 November 2020. ‘Insight. Spending Review: Reducing the 0.7% aid commitment’. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/spending-review-reducing-the-aid-commitment/>

<sup>12</sup> Devex, 26 November 2020. ‘Poverty reduction missing from new UK aid strategy’. Available at: <https://www.devex.com/news/poverty-reduction-missing-from-new-uk-aid-strategy-98655>

<sup>13</sup> In April 2020, the sector-wide loss from tuition fees to universities was estimated at £2.6 billion. London Economics, 2020. *Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on university finances, April 2020*. Available at: <http://londoneconomics.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/LE-Impact-of-Covid-19-on-university-finances-FINAL.pdf>

**First, in late 2017, the Fund was the focus of a rapid review by ICAI, with a follow-up in 2019.**<sup>14</sup> The 2019 ICAI follow-up review found that although progress had been made in all four areas covered by the 2017 recommendations (see Table 1), concerns remained that ‘BEIS continues to delegate a significant level of the oversight and accountability functions of the Fund, along with the majority of the delivery, to its delivery partners,’<sup>15</sup> as progress was often led by GCRF’s delivery partners, most notably by UKRI.

Summary of ICAI’s recommendations in 2017 and the government’s response

Subject of ICAI recommendation	UK Government response
Formulate a more deliberate strategy to encourage concentration on high- priority development challenges	Partially accepted
Develop clearer priorities and approaches to partnering with research institutions in the Global South	Accepted
Provide a results framework for assessing the overall performance, impact and value for money of the GCRF portfolio	Accepted
Develop a standing coordinating body for investment in development research across the UK government	Accepted

Source: ICAI 2019. ICAI follow-up of: Global Challenges Research Fund A summary of ICAI’s full follow-up July 2019, p. 1

<sup>14</sup> ICAI, 2017. *Global Challenges Research Fund: A rapid review, September 2017*. Available at: <https://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/ICAI-GCRF-Review.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> ICAI, 2019. *ICAI follow-up of: Global Challenges Research Fund A summary of ICAI’s full follow-up July 2019* [p. 3]. Available at: <https://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019-ICAI-Follow-up-GCRF.pdf>

**Second, in 2018, the Foundation Evaluation of GCRF was carried out, focusing on the commissioning and grant-making processes in the early stages of the Fund.**<sup>16</sup> Its headline conclusion was that *‘the GCRF is operationally functional, and processes are for the most part transparent, well-run and clear’* (p. 2). As a funding instrument, the evaluation noted that GCRF was in good health: a broad and diverse range of different funding tools had been deployed within a very short space of time, given the size of the Fund, with well-running call and selection processes. The evaluation also highlighted challenges which echo the ICAI recommendations: collaborations between UK and LMIC partners did not yet match GCRF’s ambitions for equitable and co-produced proposals; monitoring and evaluation activities had been slow to develop, notably the lack of a portfolio-level view of programmes and projects per DP to understand strategically where funding gaps might be filled and allow oversight and accountability.

**Third, in 2020, the Inception Report for this evaluation carried out a high-level portfolio review.** This also identified challenges relating to strategic management, and monitoring and reporting for accountability:

- In the portfolio, **middle-income countries dominate**, with the exception of Uganda, potentially leading to an unbalanced portfolio in terms of GCRF’s ambitions to build capacity and tackle development challenges in LMICs – this has implications for the evaluation to understand strategically how funding decisions have been arrived at, the relevance of the portfolio to LMIC priorities, and the fairness of UK–LMICs collaborations.
- The **interim financial reporting and monitoring system** poses some challenges for understanding how funds have been allocated and spent, although the imminent deployment of an integrated reporting system, RODA, was noted.

These previous assessments made of GCRF, and the still-emerging policy and strategic context for UK aid, form the backdrop to the Management Review in 2020. The considerations outlined above have informed the module’s focus on four key areas of **strategic leadership; management processes; monitoring, evaluation and learning; and value for money (VfM)**.

## 1.3 Structure of the report

In the report, following an executive summary, we summarise our methodology and approach, identifying how we collected and analysed data and identify strengths and limitations in this approach. Our subsequent results sections cover our results in relation to GCRF: strategy; processes; monitoring, evaluation and learning; value for money; and lessons from comparator funds. The report is completed with a section summarising our conclusions and key recommendations. The Annexes provide further detail on methods and interview protocols.

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<sup>16</sup> GCRF, 2018. *GCRF Evaluation Foundation Stage*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-challenges-research-fund-gcrf-foundation-stage-evaluation>

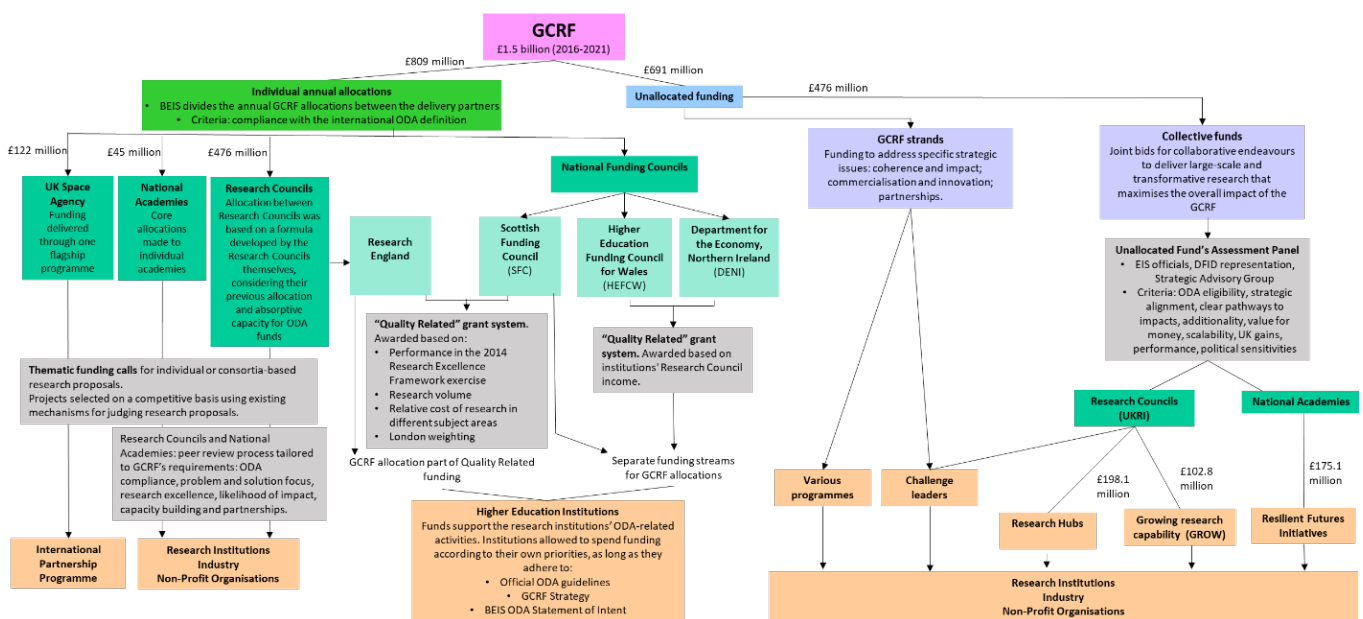
# 2. Methodology and approach

## 2.1 Overview of approach

The approach taken in this module takes into account previous reviews of GCRF17 with a view to understanding where progress has been made and how it might be improved further and prioritised. We focus on if and how strategic leadership has provided a consistent focus, to what extent processes have supported ODA excellence, how far monitoring and evaluation and other tools of learning support effective decision making and improvement within the Fund, and how far systems are in place to help manage delivery of value for money. We also recognise the significance of changes to the wider context, including Covid-19 and the merger of DFID and the FCO. Further details on our approach is given in Annex B.

We assess how well strategic leadership cascades to provide a consistent focus on development impact. We have considered this in the light of the complexity of a Fund which includes many levels, organisations and cultures, as indicated by Figure 1.

Figure 1: Overall structure and allocation of GCRF funds<sup>18</sup>.



Source: BEIS tracker, Aug 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Primarily: ICAI, 2017. *Global Challenges Research Fund: A rapid review, September 2017*. Available at: <https://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/ICAI-GCRF-Review.pdf>; ICAI, 2019. *ICAI follow-up of: Global Challenges Research Fund A summary of ICAI's full follow-up July 2019*. Available at: <https://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019-ICAI-Follow-up-GCRF.pdf>; GCRF, 2018. *GCRF Evaluation Foundation Stage*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-challenges-research-fund-grcf-foundation-stage-evaluation>

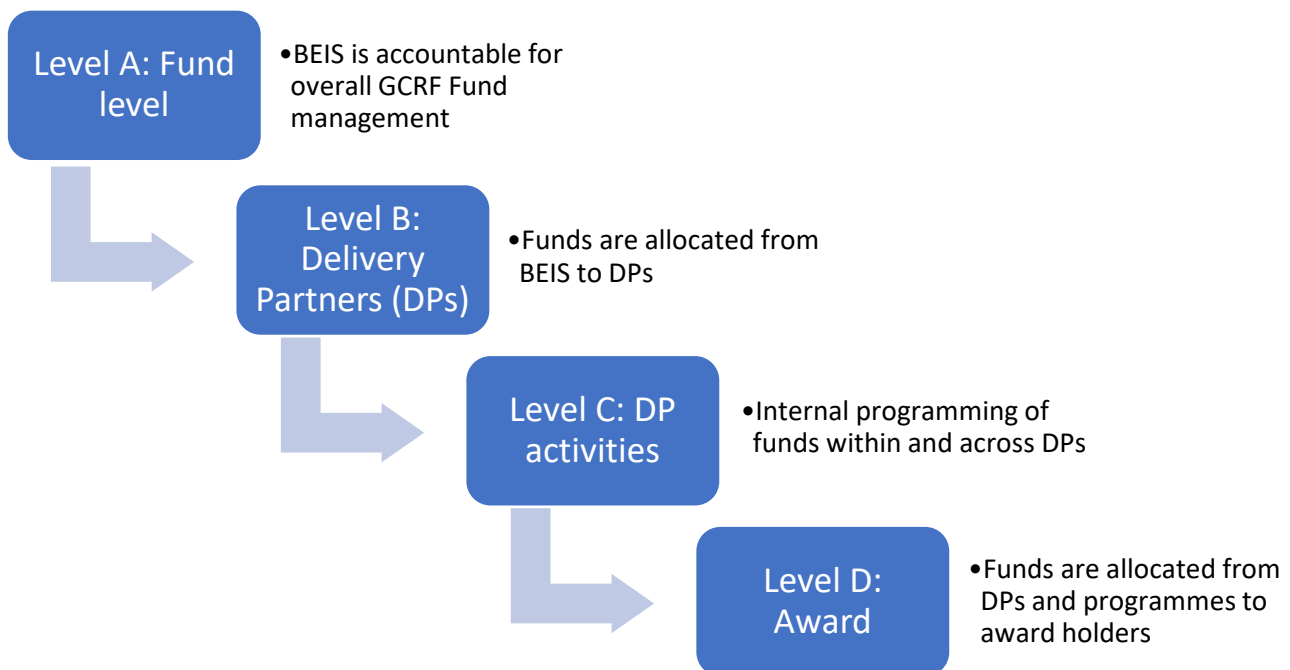
<sup>18</sup> Innovate UK started GCRF funding under GCRF in 2019. They form part of UKRI's portfolio, represented as part of the Research Councils grouping

We note that there are over 30 ‘transition points’ where funding moves from one resource holder to another and that developing shared values across the Fund, and finding a strategy, structure and systems that can sustain a consistent focus on development impact, will be challenging. However, this challenging environment also makes it likely that improvements can be identified and made. We have used McKinsey’s 7-S framework<sup>19</sup> to help think through how a consistent focus on development impact may be maintained but used this more as a constant reminder in our research rather than as an organising principle in this report.

The successful management of GCRF requires that strategic leadership, resources, and values cascade down the levels identified in Figure 1. Meanwhile monitoring information and learning cascade up. Collectively this is intended to support innovative research that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries.

GCRF is often thought of as having four levels, as described in Figure 2. We have focused at this stage of the evaluation primarily on how well the Fund and delivery partner (DP)<sup>20</sup> levels are managed (levels A and B) and how well this supports good outcomes within the specific DP activities (e.g. programmes) and awards (at levels C and D).

**Figure 2: Levels of management within GCRF**

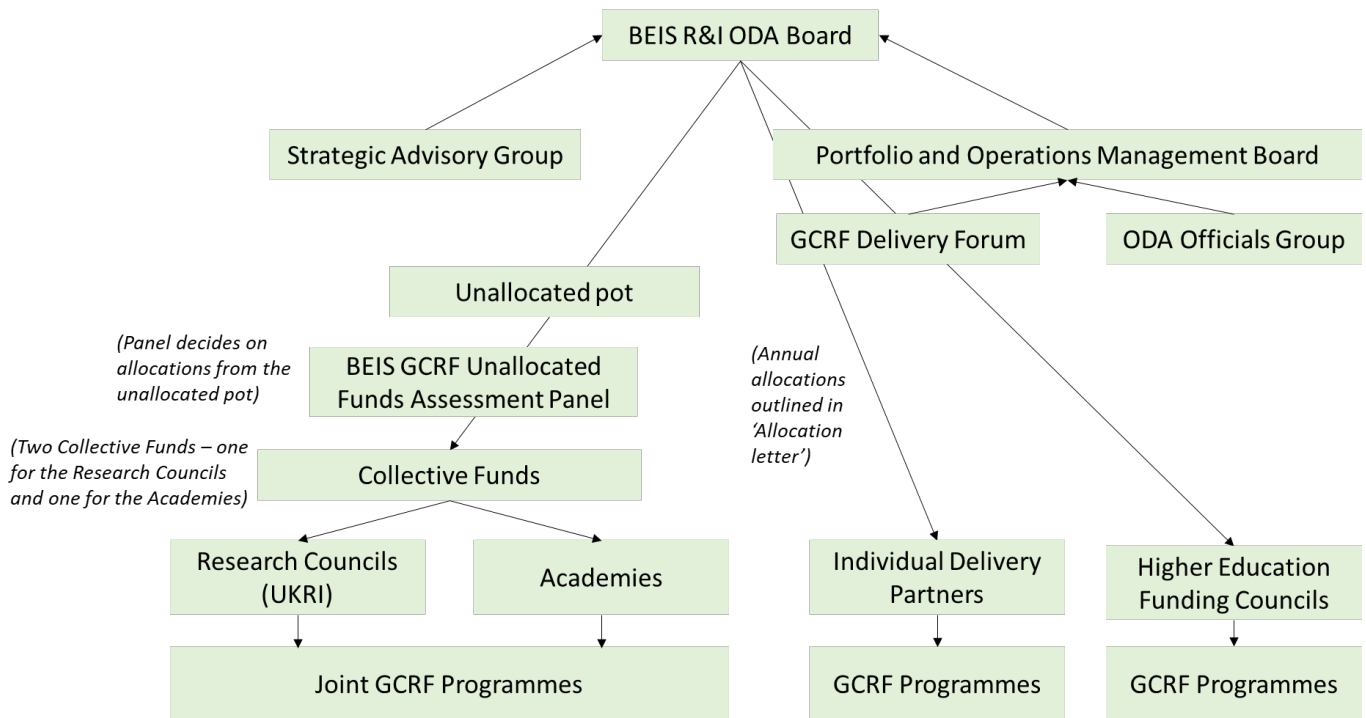


<sup>19</sup> McKinsey’s 7-S Framework has shared values at its centre and structure, strategy, systems, skills, staff and styles of leadership as further drivers of performance. See: <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/enduring-ideas-the-7-s-framework>

<sup>20</sup> Funds are allocated to delivery partners (DPs) including UKRI, the National Academies, the UK Space Agency and the UK Higher Education Funding Councils for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Critical to the success of delivering excellence in terms of both research and ODA are effective management and reporting structures. Overall formal responsibility for the coherence and strategic alignment of the GCRF portfolio sits with the ministerial-led Research and Innovation ODA Board (supported by the officials-level Portfolio and Operations Management Board). The ODA Board is supported in its portfolio management by, in addition to the Officials Group, the Strategic Advisory Group and the GCRF delivery forum.

**Figure 3: GCRF management and reporting structures**



Our approach also reflects issues identified in earlier reports, including by ICAI,<sup>21</sup> which emphasise the importance of monitoring, evaluation and learning. In a fund as complex and multi-faceted as GCRF the chances of a strategy being completely right are remote. Therefore, supporting an infrastructure for learning, sharing insights, and driving improvement based on experience is fundamental to continued progress. Indeed, the variety and heterogeneity of the Fund creates opportunities to learn from natural experiments on how success can be delivered.

Finally, we are interested in learning and improvement not for its own sake but because it can contribute to delivering better value for money. Managing to deliver value for money will be the fourth dimension of this management review. In this module we are focused on how far the Fund is being managed to deliver value for money and in later modules we move from managing for value for money to measuring VfM (although, obviously, these are related).

<sup>21</sup> ICAI, 2017. *Global Challenges Research Fund: A rapid review, September 2017*. Available at: <https://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/ICAI-GCRF-Review.pdf>

## 2.2 Overview of how we collected data

**We conducted our data collection for this management review in two steps: an initial strategy review, and detailed ‘case study’ analysis of a sample of management processes within the Fund.** Data collection included 118 interviews and a wide-ranging documentary analysis. Data collection was completed in January 2021. These data were used to address all four of the module evaluation questions listed in the introduction to this report.

**Initial strategy review.** In this step, we undertook a document review to build a picture of GCRF’s management, governance structures, processes and strategy. We also conducted 37 scoping interviews with key stakeholders at the BEIS and DP levels between August and September 2020. These interviews covered both management issues and wider issues relevant to the other modules of this evaluation (with a view to minimising the burden on interviewees). Interviews were conducted by videoconference and typically lasted 30–60 minutes, using a semi-structured approach based on the interview protocol provided in Appendix A. This step helped us refine our hypotheses and prioritise subsequent evidence collection, and enabled us to identify areas that required deeper exploration. We used this stage to identify a selection of delivery partners, Programmes and Comparators to focus on in detail in the subsequent analysis; this selection was reviewed and approved by BEIS and delivery partners (Box 2, Box 3 and Box 4).

### **Box 2. Selection of delivery partners**

- Scottish Funding Council (SFC)
- Medical Research Council (MRC)
- Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)<sup>22</sup>
- The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge (Royal Society)
- UK Space Agency (UKSA)

**Rationale for selection:** These entities cover the four different types of Delivery Partner (Funding Council, Research Council, Academy and other) and a diversity of research fields.

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<sup>22</sup> The MRC and ESRC are part of UKRI. UKRI or these Research Councils can be regarded as the Delivery Partner – in this case we have chosen to refer to the Research Councils as Delivery Partner.



### Box 3. Selection of programmes

Cross-DP:

- UKRI Collective Programme
- Joint Academies Resilient Futures Programme

Large Flagship:

- UKRI Interdisciplinary Research Hubs
- FLAIR

Smaller Programmes:

- ARUA–UKRI Partnership Programme
- Africa Catalyst Programme
- Demonstrate Impact
- MRC/BBSRC GCRF Networks for Vaccine R&D

**Rationale for selection:** this selection covers a diversity of types of programme, including cross-DP programmes, large flagship programmes and smaller programmes.

### Box 4. Selection of comparators

UK government-backed funds:

- UKRI Strategic Priorities Fund (SPF)
- UKRI Fund for International Collaboration (FIC)
- Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CCSF), FCDO

International development research funds from other countries:

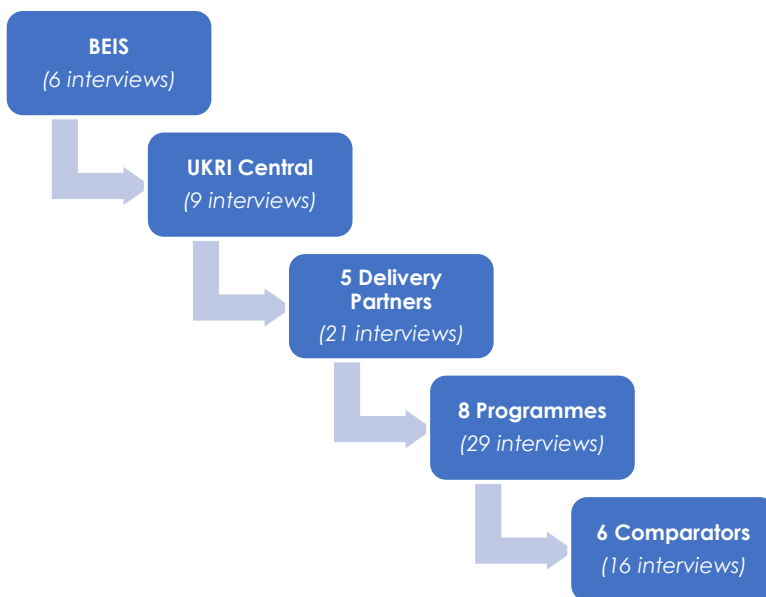
- Norwegian Programme for Capacity Development in Higher Education and Research for Development (NORHED)
- The Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for Development (Swiss r4d)
- The Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

**Rationale for selection:** this selection covers three UK government-backed funds and three international development research funds from other countries. The purpose of these comparators is to explore areas of challenge for GCRF and how they are experienced and addressed in other contexts, as well as to identify examples of good practice and learning.

**Detailed review and analysis of strategy, processes and MEL.** We then conducted a more detailed analysis of management at different levels within the Fund, based on the sample selected in the first phase of the work. This consisted of desk research and key informant interviews. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 81 respondents. 65 of these were across different parts of the GCRF portfolio and 16 with comparator funds (Figure 4).

Interviews were conducted by videoconference between September 2020 and January 2021 and typically lasted 30–60 minutes. Interview protocols are provided in Annex A. These interviews, together with further desk research, enabled us to map major policy and management processes and identify responsibilities and accountabilities. This included decision making around: (1) the GCRF strategy and its evolution; (2) programming in GCRF, including cross-DP programming and joint calls; FLAIR; (4) arrangements for M&E and use of evidence to inform organisational learning; (5) value for money. Management Review interviews across different levels of the GCRF portfolio and with comparator funds. Total number of interviews: 81.

**Figure 4: Semi-Structured Interview Process**



## 2.3 Overview of how we developed our analysis

**Through our initial strategy review** we developed a narrative of progress and developed initial views of what was driving and inhibiting progress, and how further improvement might be achieved, with regard to our four evaluation questions. We then tested and developed these in detail through step two: the detailed case studies.

Following development of an initial narrative of progress, we conducted cross-analyses of the findings from each case study, primarily through a series of internal workshops combined with triangulation of data on specific issues across the examples using the common reporting structure. All DP and programme case studies have a common framework structure focusing

on key aspects – strategy, process and MEL – allowing us to map and compare observations and insights across examples using a framework synthesis approach.

To support this cross-case analysis, we conducted a series of internal workshops attended by the management review project team to allow us to discuss and bring together findings. We held one workshop focusing on Strategy, Process and MEL within the Fund, a second workshop focusing specifically on VfM, and a final workshop on insights from the comparators. In each workshop, members of the team presented key findings and observations from their cases, and then we discussed themes and issues emerging across the set, including areas of difference and examples of novel practice. We used McKinsey's 7-S framework as a tool to prompt discussion within these workshops.

Through the workshops, we developed a set of emerging findings and shared them with all participants for comment. These were then tested and refined against the data from each case study to produce the findings presented in this report. For example, all the findings on strategy were discussed in a workshop to identify key themes emerging. We then reviewed the strategy sections of each write-up and mapped evidence from these documents to the themes identified. We also noted other key features emerging from the write-ups then iteratively reviewed these new emerging themes against the other documents, triangulating the evidence to identify a final set of key messages and themes supported by the evidence generated. Findings were then written up drawing evidence together under the themes identified narratively.

## 2.4 Strengths and limitations of the approach we adopted

**Like all evaluations, this management review faced constraints of time and money, and priorities were identified; therefore the data collected and analysed will have limitations as well as strengths.** The important thing is to reflect clearly on what the strengths and weaknesses are. These are highlighted below.

### Strengths

1. **The analysis covers different levels in the portfolio and allows in-depth analysis:** By focusing in on a sample of case studies spanning levels A (Fund level), B (DP level) and C (activity – typically programme - level), we have been able to draw insights on how management operates and cascades down through these levels; and by focusing in on a sample of case studies at each level, we have been able to conduct a more insightful and nuanced analysis, in context, than would have been possible by taking a cross-cutting look at the Fund as a whole. This enables us to draw out examples of interesting practice and contrast differences in approach and perspectives across and within different levels of the Fund's operation.
2. **Comparator Fund analyses offer new insights:** Through our analysis of comparator funds, we can draw out examples of alternative practice and lessons learned to inform

the operation of GCRF. This enables a wider perspective in our analysis and recommendations that is not constrained by practice and norms in GCRF and which allows opportunities for novel and creative thinking to be brought to some of the challenges facing GCRF – as well as reflection on issues which may be wider challenges inherent to the context in which GCRF is operating.

### Limitations

- 1. The approach provides a partial picture:** Given the scale and complexity of the Fund, we have selected a sample of DPs and programmes to analyse as ‘case studies’ for the wider operation of the Fund. These were selected to cover different ‘types’ of DPs to ensure we have as full a picture as possible. However, inevitably there are nuances and differences between the operation and management within even seemingly ‘similar’ DPs, and these will not have been captured fully in the analysis at this stage. Similarly, we have analysed a small subset of programmes within GCRF and there is significant additional diversity at the programme level (level ‘C’) which is not captured in this analysis. In addition, the operation and management of the Fund within DPs may be complex and diverse, particularly for those DPs with a large GCRF portfolio, and equally it may have changed over time. We have attempted to capture this diversity and variation as well as changes over time to the extent possible within the scope of the work conducted so far, but inevitably this will be to some extent a partial picture. There may be aspects of the operation of some DPs, and views and perspectives, that are not fully captured by this analysis.
- 2. Analysis draws upon self-reported views of internal stakeholders:** We have conducted a wide range of interviews with key stakeholders involved in the management of the Fund across different aspects of the portfolio. This gives us an interesting and nuanced picture of the operation of the Fund from a range of different viewpoints. However, we are reliant on the candour of those respondents and their perceptions; it may be that there are differences in the extent to which respondents felt enabled – through knowledge, trust or other constraints – to provide a full reflection of the true operation of the Fund. Equally, we are reliant on those views we sought in the evaluation. These are numerous and at a range of levels within the Fund. However, there are some perspectives we have not addressed in this analysis. For example, consultation with award holders for this analysis was very limited. This will be addressed in the other modules in stage 1a and in future stages of the evaluation. We also note that we were careful to consider evidence provided in context and triangulate evidence from multiple sources to develop the key findings set out here.

## 3. Results

*In this Chapter we set out the results of the management review. This is structured around five topics: Strategy; Processes; Monitoring, evaluation and learning; Value for money; and Lessons from comparators.*

### 3.1 Strategy

**The Module Evaluation Question answered in this section is ‘How is strategic leadership addressed in GCRF and to what extent does it cascade through the Fund to provide a consistent focus on development impact to realise the Fund’s aims and purpose?’** In Box 5 we provide a summary of the key conclusions.

#### **Box 5. Strategy – overview of key conclusions**

- **GCRF has retained its original strategic aims of both research and ODA excellence, and taken steps to acquire improved traction as decision-making ‘cascades’ through the Fund:** The strategic aims and core criteria of GCRF have gained more traction over the necessarily complex set of organisations and systems involved in delivery. However, gaps or imbalances in the portfolio appear not to be identified or rectified. For example, low-income countries may be underserved and gender not given the priority that might be expected.
- **Despite these improvements, and despite actors in the system being supportive of the GCRF vision of development impact, there remains a lack of clarity about the practical steps necessary to link the strategic vision to change on the ground. This should be a cause for concern and a focus of future action:** Despite improvements there are still limitations to steering a very varied set of organisations each with their own practices and cultures. This concern has been repeated on several occasions since 2017 – for example, in the foundation stage evaluation<sup>23</sup> and the ICAI follow-up review.<sup>24</sup> Heterogeneity could be a source of strength, and variety of expertise is crucial to delivering research and innovation in such diverse contexts. However, that diversity needs to be managed within a clear and widely understood theory of change with clear opportunities to share learning and experiences.

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<sup>23</sup> GCRF, 2018. *GCRF Evaluation Foundation Stage*. Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-challenges-research-fund-gcrf-foundation-stage-evaluation>

<sup>24</sup> ICAI, 2019. *ICAI follow-up of: Global Challenges Research Fund A summary of ICAI’s full follow-up July 2019* [p. 3]. Available at: <https://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019-ICAI-Follow-up-GCRF.pdf>

- **UKRI25 continues to play an important role in providing strategic direction and this has been reinforced by the role of Challenge Leaders:** Organisations such as, and in particular, UKRI are vital intermediaries in both communicating and explaining the aims of GCRF and helping to organise and structure competition based on delivering the aims of GCRF. This is reinforced by Challenge Leaders' and Interdisciplinary Research Hubs which provide further ways to engage, inform and mobilise researchers. UKRI also coordinates 'upwards' to contribute to overall strategy. Understanding how this function might be extended and strengthened (whether or not by UKRI) would provide practical insights for further strengthening the link between strategy and action. Other examples (such as UKSA) exist of specific steps taken to create greater coherence.
- **The current approach results in variable degrees of 'fit' between strategic aims and activities funded:** UKRI, for example, provides strong communication tools for the 400 partner organisations involved with the 12 Interdisciplinary Research Hubs which together operate in 85 countries<sup>26</sup> but the capacity of UKRI to reach partners (and especially non-UK partners) is limited. ESRC and MRC take differing approaches to their role in providing strategic direction to their award holders.
- **The involvement of Southern partners in strategic development has more recently gained greater emphasis but is still relatively limited:** There have been several initiatives designed to strengthen Southern involvement and these are widely welcomed across GCRF and should be continued and deepened. However, they remain very limited relative to the strategic direction of GCRF as a whole.
- **There are signs of strategic agility in response to Covid-19:** As with all research and innovation, Covid-19 tested the flexibility of the Fund and provoked some agile responses.

## 3.2 GCRF has acquired greater strategic direction but there remains a lack of clarity about the intended routes to development impact

**Previous critiques of a lack of strategic direction have been acknowledged and actions taken with the aim of addressing them.** The basic strategy of the GCRF is provided by the UK Strategy for the Global Challenges Research Fund (Box 6).<sup>27</sup> Published in 2017, this document sets out the broad context, vision and investment strategy for the GCRF, including the different 'Challenge Areas' to be addressed by GCRF-funded research. As noted by reviews predating this evaluation, while the 2017 strategy (published before the 2017 ICAI

<sup>25</sup> We note that some BEIS staff are housed within UKRI for administrative purposes. Throughout this report we consider those staff as part of the BEIS team. All references to UKRI consider UKRI in its role as a DP only.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, <https://www.ukri.org/our-work/collaborating-internationally/global-challenges-research-fund/>

<sup>27</sup> Together with associated documents such as the GCRF guidance on ODA compliance.

report) effectively outlined the basic rationale and principles for the GCRF, ICAI judged that it provided insufficient direction and traction for the Fund, leading to a ‘scattered portfolio’ of investments rather than a concentration on priority, high-impact areas.<sup>28</sup> This recommendation was only partially accepted by BEIS (see Table 1)<sup>29</sup>. In Box 6 we briefly outline the key features of the GCRF strategy and the core criteria that underpinned this strategy.

### **Box 6. Key points from GCRF strategy document ‘UK Strategy for the Global Challenges Research Fund’**

The aim of the GCRF is ‘to ensure UK science takes the lead in addressing the problems faced by developing countries, while developing our ability to deliver cutting-edge research’ (p. 2). Through £1.5 billion of Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding between 2016 and 2021, the Fund aimed to contribute to the global effort to address the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This, according to the strategy, should be achieved through a set of complementary Research and Innovation 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.’ (p. 3).

The strategy went on to say that the Fund will aim to achieve this through bringing together complementary skills and strengths across the research and higher education landscape to support individuals and research that complies with a set of core criteria:

- ODA compliance.
- Problem- and solution-focused.
- Research excellence with impact.
- Capacity building and partnership.
- Agile response to emergencies.

Research within GCRF must also focus on challenges that effect countries on the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) list.

How this strategic orientation might result in a series of impacts – widespread adoption of research in beneficial innovations, more equitable research partnerships, and contributing to

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<sup>28</sup> ICAI, 2017. *Global Challenges Research Fund: A Rapid Review*. Available at: <https://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/ICAI-GCRF-Review.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> For the full response to the ICAI review see: ICAI 2019. ICAI follow-up of: Global Challenges Research Fund A summary of ICAI's full follow-up July 2019, p. 1

achieving SDGs – was described in the GCRF Theory of Change articulated in GCRF Evaluation Foundation Stage Final Report in 2018.<sup>30</sup> The 2018 evaluation noted that the GCRF had quickly become operationally functional with processes that were mostly transparent and well-run. It also noted the complexity and interdependencies that would need to be managed if the strategy was to be delivered. Some limitations in this respect were identified in the ICAI 2017 report referred to above.

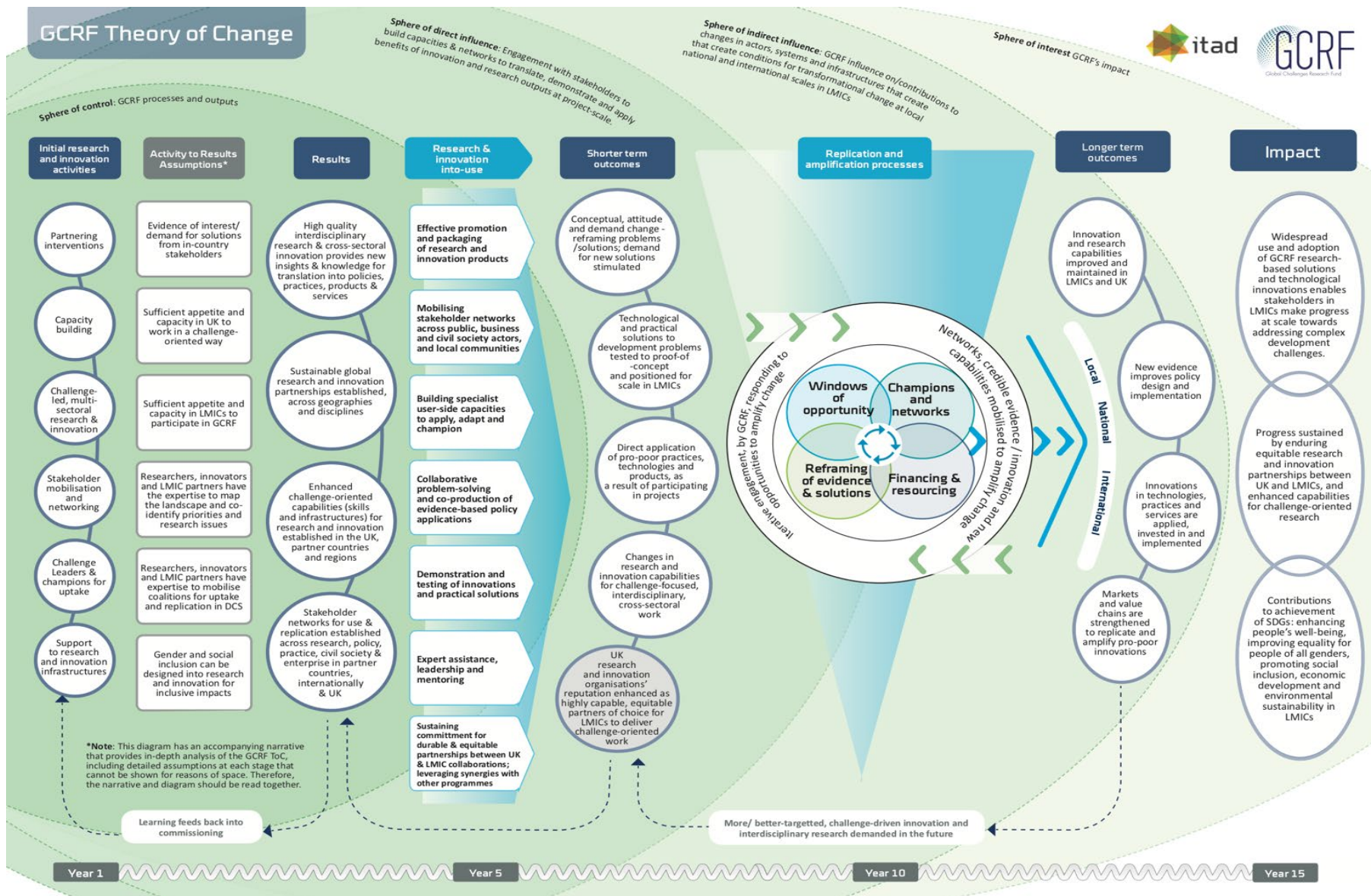
Efforts have been and continue to be made to build on this start and address the ICAI concern that the Fund can be unfocused and with a scattered portfolio. These efforts would be strengthened by a greater engagement with the GCRF theory of change. A GCRF theory of change was described in the 2018 GCRF Evaluation Foundation Stage Final Report and it is not clear why this (or any other theory of change) is not well known and commonly used by actors within the Fund to support delivery, design and M&E. A theory of change is certainly not a panacea for the problems of management, but it does help to identify where agency for actions needs to be achieved. It is reproduced here in Figure 5 for ease of reference. A ToC is a valuable tool for strategic management since it provides a shared articulation of goals and the pathways intended to achieve these which allows the portfolio to be aligned and managed to match these pathways – and indeed a route to test whether the intended pathways and ultimate outcomes are being realised over time, allowing for course correction.

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<sup>30</sup> Barr, J *et al.*, 2018. *GCRF Evaluation Foundation Stage Final Report*. London: BEIS.



Figure 5: The GCRF Theory of Change as described in the 2018 GCRF Evaluation Foundation Stage Final Report



The strategy as outlined in 2017 (the right-hand side of the Theory of Change) remains broadly in place. There have indeed been efforts to strengthen delivery and these are mainly focused on achieving change on the left-hand side of the Theory of Change. The BEIS-level governance structure, centred around the two key policymaking bodies – the Research and Innovation ODA Board and the Portfolio, Operations and Management Board (POMB) – has enabled the adoption of new elements of GCRF strategy that provide greater strategic coordination and a more targeted approach.

Key examples of this include the adoption of six strategic GCRF Challenge Areas (building on the longer list of Challenge Areas identified by the 2017 strategy) and the appointment of ‘Challenge Leaders’ tasked with ensuring coherence across those portfolios. According to interviewees, the appointment of Challenge Leaders in particular has helped to ensure greater focus and synergy.

In addition, the GCRF Strategic Advisory Group<sup>31</sup> advises on both strategy and delivery and its diverse membership is charged with mobilising their own knowledge and networks to consider the effectiveness of GCRF in addressing both research and ODA challenges and achieving engagement with stakeholders. Their requirement to consider ODA is seen to be an important part of keeping the Fund strategically focused on this.

While steps have therefore been taken to provide greater strategic direction of the GCRF, a significant group of stakeholders suggests that more must be done in this respect. One interviewee, for example, highlighted the need for even more specific focus on development challenges where GCRF funds can make an impact, particularly given the emergence of other more targeted research for development funds, such as the Ayrton Fund.<sup>32</sup> The need for more strategic direction was also noted at the DP level, where it was said that more strategic direction would facilitate the delivery of a more balanced portfolio (i.e. a more conscious balancing of effort to match the likelihood of impact with where the Fund could most successfully work). This need was particularly apparent in relation to not only low-income countries but also gender (which we discuss in detail in another module).

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<sup>31</sup> An independent body comprised of government officials, business leaders, senior academics with development expertise and other stakeholders, which provides advice on strategy development and delivery

<sup>32</sup> The Ayrton Fund is a UK fund announced in 2019 at the UN Climate Action Summit. It aims to provide scientists and innovators with access to £1 billion of aid funding to research, develop and demonstrate technologies and business models that enable developing countries to transition towards clean energy solutions and meet global climate targets. The £1 billion is part of the £11.6 billion doubling of UK international climate finance (ICF), part of UK Official Development Assistance (ODA). See: <http://mission-innovation.net/2020/01/10/uk-announces-plan-to-double-efforts-in-developing-nations-to-boost-clean-energy-innovation/>

### 3.3 UKRI has an important role to play in supporting GCRF strategy, and this has both benefits and drawbacks

**UKRI plays an important role in both the substantive content of strategy and in managing more administrative processes of developing and managing strategy.** It is therefore important that BEIS, which lacks deep expertise and experience in R&I delivery issues, is able to work closely with UKRI, and with UKRI's Challenge Leaders, to strengthen the ODA component when developing and implementing strategy.

Having a diverse range of DPs can add value in delivering different approaches and addressing a range of communities within and beyond the UK R&I system. However, it is worth noting that most DPs do not have specialist ODA advisors. Consequently, the role of UKRI is often important, and this is reflected not only in the representation of UKRI within the BEIS policymaking bodies<sup>33</sup> but also in the key role UKRI has played in GCRF strategic initiatives, such as the selection of six Challenge Areas, the appointment of Challenge Leaders and the GCRF Interdisciplinary Research Hubs.<sup>34</sup> In the case of the Challenge Leaders, for example, UKRI played the lead role in the recruitment of all Challenge Leaders, with all such leaders being employed by UKRI as well as their academic institution.

As the largest delivery partner,<sup>35</sup> UKRI's active role in GCRF strategy development has important benefits. As the major delivery partner of the GCRF (note we also refer to its constituent councils as delivery partners), UKRI manages GCRF investments at such a scale that it is well placed to notice when structures and systems are not working as they should. The active role of UKRI thus ensures that BEIS is informed of emerging issues and challenges with respect to the strategic management of the Fund, and well positioned to take remedial action, as was done in the case of the Challenge Leaders which were brought in to provide more strategic direction and coherence to the portfolio.

**A key aspect of UKRI's involvement in strategy – and the Challenge Leaders – is to strengthen coherence and engagement with the research community.** The nine Challenge Leaders were announced in April 2018 and were an explicit response to ICAI's criticism that the GCRF portfolio was too unfocused and thinly spread to achieve impact. Their role is effectively to bind development needs and the priorities of developing countries to the most innovative research in their Challenge Area. This is both a translational role and a mobilising role. In practice this includes shaping investment strategy, scoping calls, and providing support for interdisciplinary working. Challenge Leaders are expected to take advantage of the expertise of the Strategic Advisory Group in fulfilling this role. To be effective, Challenge

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<sup>33</sup> E.g. UKRI provides the secretariat to the Strategic Advisory Group

<sup>34</sup> An 'overly decentralized structure' represented another key critique of GCRF made by the 2017 ICAI Report. ICAI, 2017. *Global Challenges Research Fund: A Rapid Review*. Available at: <https://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/ICAI-GCRF-Review.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> Alongside the smaller DPs: Scottish Funding Council, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, Higher Education Division Northern Ireland, Academy of Medical Sciences, Royal Society, British Academy, Royal Academy of Engineering and UK Space Agency.

Leaders need also to build strong relationships with key academic leaders in their area, the GCRF Interdisciplinary Research Hubs, and specific projects.

More broadly, the involvement of UKRI brings a 'bottom-up', 'consultative' dimension to the strategic management of GCRF, ensuring that the perspectives of the research community are considered in Fund-level decision making. In this context, the involvement of UKRI has contributed to sense that GCRF is a fund established by the government but in certain important respects owned by the UK (and to an extent, global) research community. Other benefits mentioned by interviewees include the constructive role of UKRI in communicating between BEIS and DPs.

**Despite these benefits, there are risks that UKRI's strategic role creates a perception of a 'UKRI-centric' approach.** Widely held views regarding the benefits of UKRI involvement in GCRF strategy development are, to a limited extent, offset by concerns about an overly 'UKRI-centric' approach. The Challenge Leaders initiative in particular has been criticised by some for its lack of effective communication with DPs apart from UKRI (Academies, Funding Councils and UKSA), including the lack of awareness among Challenge Leaders of non-UKRI portfolios of research. However, there are counter-examples, such as regular engagement between Challenge Leaders and the British Academy on issues related to conflict, sustainable cities and education.

According to UKRI, the importance of engaging other DPs is now well understood by the Challenge Leaders. As evidence of this, UKRI cites examples such as the effective interaction between Challenge Leaders and the National Academies in the establishment of new GCRF programmes. However, non-UKRI DPs highlight limits in the level of communication with and awareness of UKRI-based GCRF activities and a limited level of direct engagement with UKRI actors, including the Challenge Leaders.

### 3.4 The ways in which Fund-level strategy influences strategic approaches at the DP and programme levels varies, mostly reflecting prior ways of working

**Across the GCRF DPs, there are differences in the way in which Fund-level strategy translates into strategies and programmes as it cascades down.** Broadly, these differences centre around the extent to which strategic approaches are led by UKRI strategic frameworks or developed more autonomously at the level of each delivery partner (including ESRC, MRC, Academies, and so on). ESRC's strategy for the use of GCRF funds is guided by the wider UKRI strategy for GCRF. While ideas for ESRC's high-level focus areas are developed by the UKRI(?) Head of International Development in consultation with ESRC teams and other reference bodies, these ideas are also discussed with UKRI's Challenge Leaders to

ensure their alignment with UKRI's (and BEIS's) strategic focus.<sup>36</sup> In developing programmes and calls, ESRC also adheres to UKRI-wide policies, guidance and procedures.

By comparison, the strategic approach of MRC (also a UKRI DP) appears to have been shaped less by UKRI's strategic framework than by merging these with its own organisational objectives and emerging areas of interest with a view to maximising impact. Building on its already well-established and considerable track record in infectious disease research, MRC has used GCRF funding (together with funds from other sources) to both build on this portfolio and to expand its strategic focus to non-communicable diseases (NCDs). The launch of a series of strategic calls in these two areas (as well as the more recent launch of the MRC Applied Global Health Research Board) have been developed in alignment with overarching GCRF strategic priorities but have also been led by MRC's own organisational goals.

Naturally, the strategies of DPs outside of UKRI (Academies, Funding Councils and UKSA) are also less influenced by UKRI's frameworks and mechanisms. Here, again, the development of strategies for using GCRF funds has in most cases taken place relatively autonomously, with emphasis on alignment between DPs' organisational agendas and the GCRF's overarching strategic objectives.

The Royal Society, for example, has used GCRF funding both to consolidate its existing focus areas on international collaboration and early careers and to embark on new ventures in the field of capacity building, in particular through its Future Leaders – African Independent Research (FLAIR) programme. Theories of change developed for FLAIR and other RS programmes help to ensure alignment with Fund-level strategic priorities.

While conforming to this general pattern, UKSA is also distinct in that its GCRF strategy is not connected to its broader portfolio of work. Here, then, rather than enabling UKSA to build on existing or emerging areas of interest, GCRF funding has been used to establish new areas of work. Consequently, the strategy developed by UKSA has been broad.

The International Partnership Programme (IPP), the UKSA's sole GCRF-funded programme, uses the Sustainable Development Goals as the primary framework for defining development challenges. Projects funded by the IPP are mapped onto the GCRF's Challenge Areas to ensure their strategic alignment.

In the case of the SFC, as well as other Funding Councils, the strategy development process is different again in that it draws upon the three-year strategies developed by individual higher education institutions (HEIs), reflecting the nature of QR spending. These three-year strategies set out how each HEI intends to prioritise and spend the funds indicatively allocated by BEIS.<sup>37</sup> This emphasises the various 'levels' at which strategic thinking and decision making can fall – from the individual project level to the overarching Fund level. Such devolution of strategy can have benefits in enabling agility, innovation and embracing the diversity and complexity in such

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<sup>36</sup> In identifying focus areas, ESRC has concentrated on identifying gaps in addressing SDGs relevant to the GCRF challenge areas.

<sup>37</sup> In addition to providing the basis for NFCs' GCRF strategies, all HEI three-year strategies are also reviewed by both NFCs and BEIS to ensure their ODA compliance.

a large and diverse fund. But, in line with concerns expressed prior to this evaluation, there are challenges in delivering the impacts of the Fund where strategy is bottom-up rather than top-down.

At present, the GCRF strategy is serving as an overarching ‘frame’ against which different parts of the Fund can match their work and address aspects of the Fund’s strategic aims rather than a strong driver of DP activity with ODA impacts at its heart. There is an inevitable degree of tension between strategic autonomy that enables agility ‘from below’ and a strong, shared and coherent focus on development impact. However, this is not consciously managed to achieve a creative tension between the organisational and cultural values of DPs and the vision of GCRF.

### 3.5 Collaboration with Southern partners has gained greater emphasis within GCRF strategy; it is still patchy, but there are important and creative efforts that can be built upon

**Another way the strategic purpose of GCRF should be strengthened is through ensuring the effective collaboration of Southern partners in both framing strategy and in supporting effective delivery.** Across the GCRF there is widespread recognition of the need for meaningful involvement of Southern partners. This was repeated across many of our interviews. Equitable north–south partnerships and capacity building, both of which feature in the UK Strategy for the Global Challenges Research Fund (2017), have been highlighted as key focus points of GCRF strategy moving forward. Both aspects have also been prominent with Fund-level monitoring and evaluation efforts, as discussed later in the report. Collaborating with Southern partners also forms a key focus of several programmes established at the DP level, as exemplified by the Royal Society’s FLAIR capacity building programme.

However, although the increasing emphasis on working with Southern partners represents an important area of progress for GCRF, progress is patchy. In particular, although we see some examples of Southern involvement in research processes (as discussed in Section 3.2), collaboration at the strategic level is much more limited. As is often the case with other aspects of GCRF, there are some important and notable examples of good practice:

- The MRC’s Applied Global Health Research Board,<sup>38</sup> a grant-making body established to allocate the MRC’s GCRF funding, has developed both a strategy and implementation approach that emphasises capacity building and equal partnership between UK and LMIC counterparts.
- The Royal Society’s FLAIR programme is a collaboration with the African Academy of Sciences that develops strategy and priorities jointly.

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<sup>38</sup> <https://mrc.ukri.org/funding/science-areas/global-health-and-international-partnerships/applied-global-health-research-board/>

- UKRI has used GCRF funding to establish an international peer review college to provide expert review on overseas development assistance funding, especially those funded through GCRF. It has some 300 members from both academic and non-academic backgrounds, and overwhelmingly from countries eligible to receive ODA. UKRI also has a strategic partnership with ARUA.
- At the wider Fund level, there have been efforts to strengthen Southern involvement – notably an increase in Southern representation in the Strategic Advisory Group (SAG), though the majority of members are still based at UK institutions.

All the Challenge Leaders are based at UK institutions, but they do also have experience of overseas research (although this is not necessarily the same as working in, and understanding, the development context).

### 3.6 There are signs of strategic agility in response to Covid-19

One of the GCRF's goals is to 'provide an agile response to emergencies where there is an urgent research need'.<sup>39</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic has provided a test of this, and in light of the crisis a bespoke 'Agile Response' call<sup>40</sup> was developed to support existing GCRF funds to address Covid-19-related challenges (see Box 7). According to one BEIS interviewee, this demonstrated BEIS's ability to effectively expedite the allocation process in response to pressing research needs.<sup>41</sup> This was supported by a respondent at UKRI, who also emphasised that this agile response was facilitated by the centrality of UKRI in GCRF,<sup>42</sup> and supported also by a respondent from the ARUA–UKRI partnership programme. On a broader level, some respondents at UKRI contend that the GCRF's ability to rapidly respond to emergencies and opportunities lies in part because it is centred in UKRI.<sup>43</sup>

However, this potential for agility might in some cases be constrained by the availability of data to guide agile strategic responses (explored more in section 3.3) and also interplays with issues of transparency and consistency of funding which have implications for the ability of the Fund to deliver longer-term programmes of work, as well as a lack of clear lines of responsibility and accountability to drive strategic agility. This is explored further in section 3.2.

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<sup>39</sup> UKRI, 2019. *UK Research and Innovation Delivery Plan 2019*.

<sup>40</sup> UKCDR, 2020. 'UKRI GCRF/Newton Fund Agile Response call to address COVID-19'. Available at: <https://www.ukcdr.org.uk/funding-call/ukri-gcrf-newton-fund-agile-response-call-to-address-covid-19/>

<sup>41</sup> M4.

<sup>42</sup> M10

<sup>43</sup> M10.

### **Box 7. Covid-19 Agile Response call**

In response to the Covid-19 crisis GCRF, in collaboration with the Newton Fund, launched an Agile Response call to provide funding to support short-term research projects 'addressing and mitigating the health, social, economic, cultural and environmental impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak in Low and Middle-Income Countries'.<sup>44</sup> In addition to new applications through this scheme, existing award holders were invited to repurpose their funding to Covid-19-related research. The Agile Response call announced its first tranche of funding in September 2020 and a second round in December 2020, with £14.5 million invested in total across 40 projects spanning over 100 universities and 39 LMICs.<sup>45</sup> Examples of work funded include a study modelling Covid-19 exposure risks in public and private transit to support decision making in Bangladesh, Uganda and Nigeria; work by STFC in collaboration with CERN to develop a cost-effective ventilator; and analysis developing evidence to support economic policy decisions under Covid-19 in Africa and South Asia. The list of peer review panel members has also been made publicly available.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> <https://www.ukcdr.org.uk/funding-call/ukri-gcrf-newton-fund-agile-response-call-to-address-covid-19/>

<sup>45</sup> UKRI, 2019. 'International partnerships research global impact of COVID-19'. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/news/international-partnerships-research-global-impact-of-covid-19/>

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.



## 4. Processes

*In this section we explore the processes through which GCRF is implemented, how they work, and how well they support ODA excellence, in line with the wider aims and strategy of the Fund.*

### Box 8. Processes – overview of key observations

- **GCRF processes at DP and programme levels build strongly on existing funding processes but funders have moved to adapt processes to reinforce ‘ODA excellence’:** The ways in which funding processes operate – from call design and implementation to application format and assessment methods – are built around the existing, established peer-review-based systems in place at delivery partners. This reflects the importance of recognising academic independence as enshrined in the Haldane Principles.<sup>47</sup> However, in an ODA context, further adaptation is needed to reinforce how ‘ODA excellence’ is also taken into consideration in the implementation of funding processes. Funders have taken different approaches to incorporate explicit consideration of development outcomes into their funding processes. In some cases, processes have also been adapted by some funders to reflect the differences in funding development-focused research.
- **Increasingly common involvement of Southern voices in funding processes and decision making shows how processes can successfully work but need strengthening further:** Most DPs and programmes incorporate Southern perspectives in the review and selection of awards for funding in GCRF, but this can be at different levels, from peer reviewers informing decision-making panels to participation in those panels and to partnership co-working on programme implementation with counterpart organisations in the Global South. The latter of these are less common and these examples could be built upon to achieve more meaningful involvement.
- **Processes often reinforce existing networks and structures; DPs are aware of this risk but struggle to address it:** Our analysis of the GCRF portfolio<sup>48</sup> suggests funding is concentrated in certain countries – typically middle- rather than low-income countries. There appear to be two key underlying issues that lead to an over-prevalence of middle-income countries. First, there is an overreliance on existing networks. Secondly, there is a tension between processes designed to strengthen R&I based in lower-income countries and processes based on achieving research excellence. A lack of clear strategic direction at a Fund-wide level means that these

<sup>47</sup> The Haldane Report, 1918. *Ministry of Reconstruction, 1918. Report of Machinery of Government Committee. London: HMSO.*

<sup>48</sup> See GCRF evaluation Stage 1a synthesis report, ITAD and RAND Europe, 2021.

challenges are left to be navigated at the DP level; this limits how far this issue is systematically addressed.

- **Funding timelines in some instances have a negative impact on the ability of GCRF to deliver effectively and efficiently:** As the Fund has developed, concerns remain about funding timelines and consistency, and these concerns have implications for the effectiveness and efficiency of delivery. There are cases where processes that limit the scope for forward planning may have led to suboptimal use of resources as well as to limiting the ability to commit long-term funding.
- **Many DPs and programmes allocate funding only to UK-based PIs:** This UK-based funding approach has potential issues in relation to equity since it creates an inherent power imbalance in partnerships, at least in terms of the financial aspects between the UK and Southern partner organisations. However, there are practical difficulties in establishing processes to fund directly non-UK institutions. These are related to the capacity of those institutions to meet obligations such as financial management and oversight, in line with UK requirements.
- **An opportunity exists to move from multiple good processes to greater Fund-wide coherence:** This would be a good time to move from multiple good processes already apparent in GCRF towards achieving a greater Fund-level coherence between the strategic vision of GCRF and its processes. We note the variety of responses to past criticisms of:
  - the processes in place for promoting ODA excellence.
  - strengthening Southern voices.
  - ensuring a balance portfolio among both low-income countries and middle-income countries.
  - balancing the need for responsiveness with the benefits of longer-term funding arrangements.

This is an opportunity for BEIS to provide coherence to these efforts by strengthening learning in relation to processes, addressing processes that may disincentivise progress, and strengthening longer-term funding to support transformational change.

## 4.1 Good governance requires good processes

**Effective processes are critical to demonstrating and delivering transparency, accountability, and financial systems that together comprise good governance.** In this section we will explore the strengths and limitations of these processes. However, we will focus more specifically on governance in future modules.

## 4.2 GCRF processes at DP and programme levels build strongly on existing funding mechanisms but funders have moved to adapt processes to reinforce ‘ODA excellence’

**The ways in which funding processes operate – from call design and implementation to application format and assessment methods – are often built around the existing, established peer-review-based systems in place at delivery partners.** This has many benefits, as these processes are well-established, well understood, and accepted by the UK R&I community. DPs have experience in managing these processes to deliver research excellence. However, in an ODA context, further adaptation is needed to reinforce how ‘ODA excellence’ is also taken into consideration in the implementation of funding processes.

This issue is well understood in the UK R&I community and several funders have taken different approaches to incorporate explicit consideration of development outcomes into their funding processes, beyond the requirement for ODA compliance which is necessary for all GCRF funding. For example, the MRC has capacity building as a key criterion for GCRF funding, and every application is required to include a Global South capacity building strategy. The processes for securing applications for GCRF Interdisciplinary Research Hubs very strongly emphasises the importance of addressing challenge areas and building global partnerships and this is reinforced through webinars supporting applicants.

As well as including ODA considerations into assessment criteria, processes have also been adapted by some funders to reflect the differences in funding development-focused research. For example, MRC offers more opportunity for communication and consultation with applicants over the course of the application process, reflecting the fact that LMIC applicants may have less familiarity with MRC processes and hence need additional support. The Royal Society also brings in additional flexibility at the assessment stage, by using differential weighting of expert scores and the option to adjust rankings where they feel academic experts have conducted reviews in a way that may be inappropriate for LMIC applicants or unduly harsh.

Another important way in which funding processes are adapted for GCRF is the inclusion of Southern perspectives in the assessment process, as discussed in the next section.

## 4.3 Involvement of Southern voices in funding processes and decision making is now commonplace across much of the Fund, creating opportunities for cross-funder learning and tighter links between strategy and process

**Most DPs and programmes incorporate Southern perspectives in the review and selection of awards for funding in GCRF.** As noted previously, involvement of Southern viewpoints in strategy development has often been relatively limited. There is now an increasing trend within the Fund to include stakeholders from the Global South in funding

processes. This indicates that steps are being taken towards a stronger emphasis on Southern engagement across the Fund.

Changed processes include greater participation in external peer review informing funding panels and decision makers. For example, UKRI have established an International Development Peer Review College. This is a pool of around 300 global academics, researchers, policymakers, and NGO and charity ODA experts,<sup>49</sup> 90% of whom are from DAC list recipient countries (with a target for this to grow to 95%+ and with applications exclusively from DAC countries being accepted since 2019). The college provides peer review of applications for GCRF funding within UKRI and was set up with three main aims – to:

- ensure that DAC list countries' perspectives are a key part of the peer review of GCRF calls (as well as other ODA calls).
- build on GCRF's aim of fair and equitable partnerships in decision-making processes.
- facilitate closer engagement with peer reviewers from the Global South to provide training and capacity building in (interdisciplinary) peer review.<sup>50</sup>

Membership is by application, with applicants reviewed by existing college members and then a UKRI panel. As well as increasing DAC country membership, UKRI are also aiming to achieve gender parity and increased diversity in country representation and research expertise.

Southern participation also includes more direct involvement in panels making funding decisions. For example, MRC have taken steps to involve Southern viewpoints in their funding processes with the establishment of their Applied Global Health Research Board. The board is responsible for allocating MRC's GCRF funding, emphasising capacity building and equal partnership between UK and LMIC counterparts.

The Academies fund networking grants (both to deliver collaborative research involving developing countries and to strengthen future bids to GCRF) which require joint applications from researchers affiliated to institutions in DAC-listed countries and researchers from UK HEIs, with applications being reviewed by experts, including researchers from LMICs.

Other funders have developed partnerships with comparable funding bodies in the Global South, with joint leadership across all aspects of programme implementation and decision making. The Royal Society's FLAIR programme is an example of this, where the diversity in its selection panel results from the programme being delivered as a partnership with the African Academy of Sciences (AAS), in which both organisations collectively comprise the assessment panel. The programme aims for openness and equity in its partnerships with the Royal Society and AAS working as one team in delivery of the programme. At the earlier stages of the programme, the Royal Society may have led on some aspects of delivery; they are now

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<sup>49</sup> UKRI, 2020. 'International development peer review college'. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/apply-for-funding/how-we-make-decisions/international-development-peer-review-college/>

<sup>50</sup> UKRI, 2020. 'International development peer review college'. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/apply-for-funding/how-we-make-decisions/international-development-peer-review-college/> (Accessed 21 November 2020).

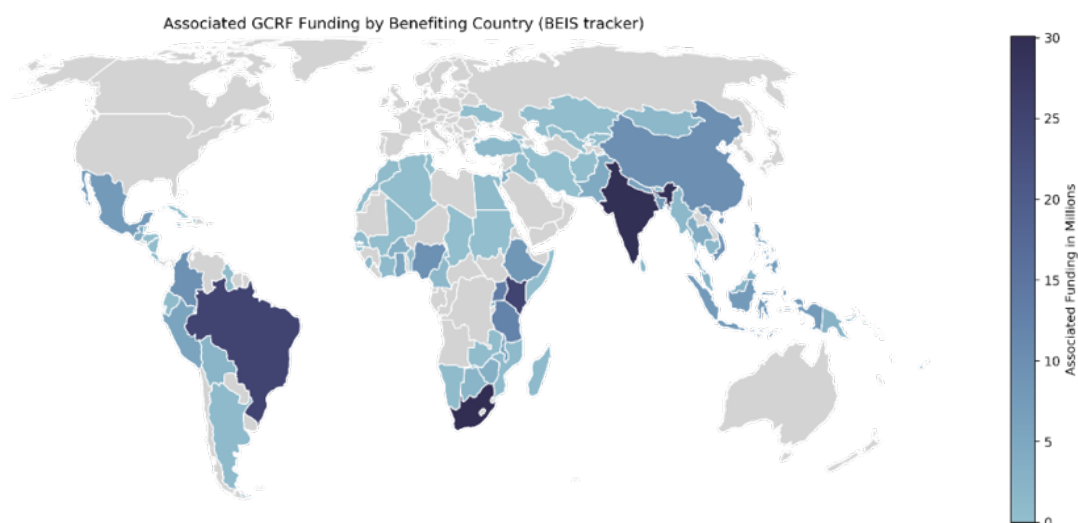
actively trying to step back from this ‘North-led’ approach and enable AAS to take more leadership in managing the investment and running their own due diligence more independently, in order to allow their systems to grow and operate effectively within and beyond the confines of this specific programme.

There is therefore an appetite for developing new processes that give a stronger role for Southern voices. A rich variety of processes is being tested, as outlined above. There are limited processes to ensure that learning from these varied processes can be captured, and insight mobilised, across the Fund. These processes can often be more challenging (because they are new) and more expensive (establishing new relationships and building on existing networks). Cross-fund processes that identify what works well, and that reward and spread good practice, are needed to reinforce and sustain existing improvements. This would create a tighter link between strategy and process.

#### 4.4 Stakeholders are aware that working with existing North–South networks weakens efforts to achieve greater equity; however, addressing these processes can be challenging

**One concern identified in our analysis of the GCRF portfolio is that funding is concentrated in middle- rather than low-income countries (see Figure 6).**<sup>51</sup> This does not appear to be the result of a conscious strategy but rather the unintended consequence of current processes and ways of working. This reflects a lack of traction linking the aims of GCRF to its processes. Consequently, there are questions as to whether the Fund is providing opportunities and capacity building in countries with less R&I experience, or rather reinforcing existing networks and structures. Analysis of programmes and DPs suggests that funders are aware of this but struggle to address it.

**Figure 6: GCRF funding by associated country, £m**



<sup>51</sup> Also see GCRF evaluation Stage 1a synthesis report, ITAD and RAND Europe, 2021.

It appears there are two key underlying issues that lead to an over-prevalence of middle-income countries. First, as with strengthening Southern voices in general, there is an overreliance on existing networks of UK academics, for reasons of feasibility and apparent efficiency. For example, when funding calls are quick turnaround it is difficult for researchers to take the time to forge new relationships and, for expediency, applicants are likely to draw on existing relationships. Consequently, efforts to strengthen Southern voices have the unintended consequence of strengthening those Southern stakeholders who are already a part of existing relationships. In our analysis of the UKRI Collective programme, for example, the timescales over which funding is allocated in GCRF led to a reliance on existing networks, and typically it is established people and networks that receive funds. Analysis of the ARUA–UKRI Partnership Programme similarly highlights that the focus of their work so far has been institutions in sub-Saharan Africa and that participation from North African and Francophone countries has been limited.

However, efforts are ongoing to increase collaboration with countries in North Africa – particularly when seeking additional funding sources beyond GCRF to increase sustainability and broaden the reach of the programme. Research Councils have also commented on this geographic skew, noting that for simplicity and efficiency, there is a natural tendency to work with English-speaking countries, as noted for several of the other programmes above.

In delivering such a complex fund there is likely to be tension between relying on existing networks and mechanisms on the one hand and creating new and more inclusive relationships on the other. However, this also suggests that opportunities may be being lost to engage with a wider group of countries and achieve important development outcomes. Directing most of the funding to countries with already relatively well-developed R&I systems, or where collaborations and networks are already in place, may be superficially efficient but may also undermine the extent to which the Fund is able to deliver on its long-term aims. The Fairness module will explore these issues in more depth.

Another potential driver of the over-prominence of middle-income countries may be the tension between funding R&I based in lower-income countries and funding based on research excellence. This was highlighted in our analysis of the Royal Society portfolio, where it is noted that a focus on excellence leads to more awards to the strongest institutes and most developed nations.

Efforts have been made to address this and processes adapted or changed – for example, inclusion of regional diversity as a consideration throughout the decision-making process, with a particular role as a ‘tie-break’ in funding decisions, and specific promotion activities to improve representation and access – such as work targeting Francophone African countries and institutions for applications to the FLAIR programme.

Challenge Leaders have also faced difficulties in ensuring the geographical mix of programmes, in part because that assessment of application excellence will result in skewed funding towards areas with a more developed research community. It is noted that underrepresented areas thematically can be addressed with highlight calls, but it is harder for

these to address geographic underrepresentation. It appears to be, for example, disproportionate funding in countries such as Kenya and Malawi, but not as much in West Africa – such as Mali and Senegal.<sup>52</sup>

However, at present no Fund-wide strategy or guidance is in place to draw these efforts together and provide a clear strategic direction at a Fund-wide level. Navigating these difficulties will always require independent decisions and action at DP level, but clearer direction from above would make these efforts more coherent, consistent and better informed by insights from across the Fund.

## 4.5 Funding timelines and uncertainties impact on the ability of GCRF to deliver efficiently and effectively

**After the GCRF was initially implemented in 2015–16, concerns were expressed – for example, in the 2017 ICAI review<sup>53</sup> – about the extent to which funds were being used efficiently and effectively due to the need to distribute funding at speed. As the Fund has developed, concerns remain about funding timelines and consistency that have implications for processes intended to deliver effectively and efficiently.** The Foundation Stage evaluation of the GCRF found that some DPs called for BEIS to adopt a longer-term approach to allocations, including the allocation of funding at intervals longer than the current annual model – though we note this is largely outside BEIS’ control. This would enable funding of long-term projects without the risk of fluctuations in annual allocations. This remains a concern for some funding programmes. For example, for the Royal Academy of Engineering’s Africa Catalyst programme, interviewees highlighted issues created by an inability to offer longer-term funding commitments. Of particular concern was the cost in terms of human resources of budget uncertainty and changes of plan. Another challenge was the need to spend money in a short period of time.

Similar issues were raised by respondents in discussion of the SFC. As well as highlighting the short-term (annual) allocations of funding which do not allow for stability and long-term planning, the mismatch between timelines for budget allocation from BEIS (which operates on a financial year basis) and the internal funding processes for HEIs (which operate on an academic year basis) were also raised. These processes are reported to create lags in the allocation of funding, which delays research and fieldwork arrangements, and this impacts the development of relationships with developing countries.

More broadly, in discussions across DPs, concerns were raised about the lack of certainty with regard to the imminent second phase of GCRF (from April 2021 onwards) – both whether it will take place and, if so, what the funding parameters would be. There was anxiety that a lack of

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<sup>52</sup> In addition to interview data, analysis of the BEIS Tracker Aug 2020 supports this, with 50 awards from UKRI and its constituent DPs listing Kenya as the benefiting country, and a further 19 listing Malawi, compared to 4 each for both Mali and Senegal.

<sup>53</sup> ICAI, 2017. *Global Challenges Research Fund: A rapid review, September 2017*. Available at: <https://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/ICAI-GCRF-Review.pdf>

time to prepare and communicate would be likely to limit the quality of the offered programmes from DPs and the level of collaboration between DPs that could be implemented.

This is linked to additional concerns about a lack of transparency which were also highlighted in the Foundation Stage of Evaluation of the GCRF, particularly in relation to the way in which individual allocations have been made across DPs. The concern in this respect would appear to be most relevant to the Academies and the UK Space Agency, allocations to Research Councils being based on a formula, developed by the Research Councils themselves, factoring in their existing allocation and capacity to absorb ODA funds.

While the barriers to long-term investments caused by the annual allocation model are recognised by many at BEIS, one interviewee stressed that any change to this model would depend on factors beyond BEIS itself; namely, the outcome of the HM Treasury spending reviews.

## 4.6 Processes for allocating funding are often limited to UK-based PIs. This has implications for equity.

**The UK-based funding approach has potential issues in relation to equity since it creates an inherent power imbalance in partnerships at least in terms of the financial dynamics between the UK and Southern partner organisations.** Some funders within GCRF distribute funds directly to LMIC applicants – for example, the MRC’s Applied Global Health Board – however for the many DPs, funds are only delivered to UK-based institutions as award leads, which may then distribute a proportion of that funding to partner institutions in the Global South. We have seen above that there has been an increased focus on equitable partnerships within GCRF, partly in response to the ICAI review.

Additional measures to promote equity include the publications of UKRI Equitable Partnerships guidance and the addition of extra questions to Researchfish (see Box 9) to evidence the presence of equitable partnerships. Despite these concerns and the steps taken, the prevalence of UK-based PIs was raised as a concern by respondents in relation to several DPs and programmes, including the ESRC, the Collective Programme and the UKRI–ARUA partnership programme.

However, DPs and programmes also highlighted some of the practical difficulties in funding directly to non-UK institutions. For example, while UK institutions and researchers ‘know the system’ at UKRI, this was thought not to be the case for African based PIs and institutions who may find UK processes difficult to navigate. There are also challenges balancing funding assurance and due diligence, particularly with regard to financial management and oversight where UK requirements and standards may differ from those in other countries. This points to the need for relationship and capacity building in relation to financial management and oversight, and potentially more flexibility in processes and requirements depending on context.



### Box 10. Researchfish<sup>54</sup>

Researchfish is a reporting tool which captures information on research outputs and outcomes across all disciplines. It is widely used to capture information on R&I funding in the UK including by all the UKRI research councils in place of end-of-grant reporting. Award holders are required to complete a survey annually capturing information on the outputs and outcomes of their research throughout the lifetime of their award and for five years subsequent to award completion. The system has a generalised set of questions which are common to all awards regardless of Fund or discipline.

Additionally, there is a GCRF-specific module that is used for GCRF-funded awards which capture information specific to the aims of the Fund, including information on topics such as equitable partnerships and capacity development. In addition to the Research Councils within UKRI, Researchfish is also used by the Academy of Medical Sciences, but it is not used by the other Academies, UKSA or Innovate UK.

Previous analysis of Researchfish data<sup>55</sup> suggests that, although there can be issues with the quality and completeness of the dataset, it nonetheless can add value, particularly in enabling aggregation and comparison of data across a range of disciplines, and measures have been put in place to validate data and integrate with other data systems such as ORCID<sup>56</sup> and Altmetric.<sup>57</sup>

## 4.7 There is a need to move from multiple (often good) processes to greater Fund-wide coherence

**There is now an opportunity to move from multiple good processes to a greater Fund-level coherence between the strategic vision of GCRF and its processes.** We have noted past criticisms of the processes in place for promoting ODA excellence, strengthening Southern voices, ensuring a balance portfolio among both low-income countries and middle-income countries, and balancing the need for responsiveness with the benefits of longer-term funding arrangements. It is very clear from the examples identified in this section that there have been many and varied responses, and especially at levels B, C and D. Organisations involved in GCRF have been adaptive and learning in relation to the processes they have put in place. This is an opportunity to use the many 'natural experiments' to take an approach based on adaptive management.

This is unlikely to be achieved by BEIS issuing instructions to be cascaded. Processes rightly reflect the deep-rooted practices and knowledge at DP and programme levels as well as the

<sup>54</sup> <https://researchfish.com/>

<sup>55</sup> Hinrichs, S., Montague, E., & Grant, J., 2015. *Researchfish: A forward look. Challenges and Opportunities for using Researchfish to Support Research Assessment*. London: The Policy Institute at King's College London.

<sup>56</sup> <https://orcid.org/>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.altmetric.com/>

practices of Southern partners. However, there are concrete actions that can be taken. Efforts should be made to establish mechanisms to identify and spread learning based on improving processes. Efforts should also be made to remove disincentives to pursue equity and new relationships. This would include recognising the additional resources required for this and recognising that building new relationships may require longer funding horizons. This might mean investment is needed specifically in relationship-building activities, for example, and that call timelines should be developed with time for this relationship development in mind. These actions would all facilitate further progress towards aligning the vision of ODA excellence with the processes shaping how GCRF works.

## 5. Monitoring, evaluation and learning

*This section aims to explore how monitoring and evaluation is conducted within GCRF, the extent to which it drives learning, and whether sufficient and appropriate information is available to support effective decision making.*

### Box 11. Monitoring, evaluation and learning – overview of key observations

- **Monitoring and evaluation processes are in place (and being developed further) across different levels but it is not always clear how this contributes learning and adaptation:** There is a range of M&E processes in place across the Fund reflecting the need to achieve accountability – including as an ODA fund. These processes are also being strengthened through new reporting tools. However, it is less clear how and whether this effectively supports learning at the Fund level or lower levels, though there are ongoing efforts to try and address this such as the development of a DMEL learning strategy.
- **Data collection approaches differ across DPs and programmes, which can create challenges in portfolio-level oversight and when sharing insights:** Some of these differences are appropriate, reflecting differences in scale and nature of different aspects of the Fund; however, without consistent data at the Fund level it is hard to draw out insights and learning at a cross-cutting level.
- **The purpose of MEL activities should be clear and specified, and where there is limited capacity efforts should be focused on activities which can best support learning:** As the approach to MEL develops, there should be an adaptive and proportionate approach, reflecting the differences in scale between DPs, as well as a clearer articulation of the purposes and benefits of data collection to support a better, more open and more consistent provision of information.

### 5.1 Monitoring and evaluation processes are in place across different levels, but it is not always clear how they contribute to learning and adaptation

**We observed a wide range of monitoring and evaluation processes in place across the Fund.** These include at the overarching level the BEIS tracker, portfolio analyses, the ongoing development of KPIs, and external evaluations. Other planned initiatives include quarterly reporting and a new reporting tool (Official Development Assistance Reporting Tool – ‘ODART’) which is intended to replace the tracker with a more efficient, streamlined and comprehensive collection of Fund-level data.

It should be recognised that GCRF engaged a number of DPs, each with pre-existing approaches to monitoring and learning. Each DP was, presumably, comfortable with its existing approach to MEL. If these processes are not sufficient for GCRF (especially in relation to ODA compliance, or to promote cross-Fund learning) the onus is on GCRF leadership to specify what more is required from each DP. In principle, an extensive level of monitoring is required in line with GCRF's funding as part of ODA (Official Development Assistance), which is subject to international and UK statutory requirements. All UK aid spend is reported to OECD and is scrutinised at an international level; and at the UK level there is also further scrutiny by ICAI. This means that data and information need to be in place to ensure and demonstrate ODA compliance, as a minimum, of the Fund.

However, there are in place several and varied M&E activities at the DP and programme levels. These include generic data collection – such as Researchfish for UKRI-based DPs as well as the Academy of Medical Sciences – and more tailored approaches specific to projects and programmes, such as the development of a theory of change and log frame for all UKSA awards. Additionally there are one-off external evaluations – for example, the ongoing evaluation of the Resilient Futures programme which is led jointly by the National Academies.

**However, despite this range of M&E activities, the extent to which they feed into learning within and across different parts of the Fund is limited.** This can be characterised as the distinction between M&E for accountability and M&E for learning and adaptive management purposes. While the accountability aspect is, to some extent in place, the learning and adaptive management aspects – at least at a Fund level – are limited. We do note, however, that efforts to address this are ongoing, including the development of a DMEL learning strategy.

Despite this, there are pockets of good practice regarding the way in which learning is supported. One example is the learning events held annually by SFC. These events bring together recipients of SFC GCRF funding to discuss cross-cutting issues such as equitable and ethical partnerships, safeguarding effective communication and gender equality,<sup>58</sup> and to share approaches and learning between institutions. This has led to changes in practice. For example, there were sessions focused on due diligence, which prompted suggestions of a unified questionnaire on due diligence to streamline processes both in Scotland and in developing countries. These learning events were put in place partly in recognition that there are significant differences in levels of capacity and capability as regards development work across institutions and in the context of SFC's perception of their role as being to broaden capacity and infrastructure for development work across Scottish HEIs.

Another example is the UKSA's relatively comprehensive and targeted MEL approach, delivered through both clear requirements at award level and bringing in external support and expertise from a specialist organisation, Caribou Space. In recognition of their lack of experience in any development work, UKSA took a strategic decision to bring in specialised

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<sup>58</sup> Bruce Ryan, 2019. 'Global Challenges Research Fund: sector meeting 29 October 2019 #GCRF'. Available at: <https://bruceryan.info/2019/11/13/global-challenges-research-fund-sector-meeting-29-october-2019-gcrf/> (Accessed on 23 November 2020).

external support to deliver on the implementation and, particularly, MEL for their International Partnerships Programme.

The resulting evaluation approach is one of the most comprehensive within the GCRF portfolio, and is summarised in Box 11. Correspondingly, these evaluations have fed into strategy. For example, one recommendation from the midline programme-level evaluation was that there should be greater co-design of both projects and their M&E processes with the international partners, to improve project and M&E quality. The response is evidenced by the updated requirements for Call 3 projects, which include increased time for the discovery phase of projects to enable more time for projects to work with their partners to develop M&E-related documents (such as the ToC and logframe) to support more reliable M&E systems and targets.

### **Box 12. M&E processes for UKSA**

To support M&E, Caribou Space have developed a common programme M&E methodology that allows results to be aggregated across IPP projects, and for project and programme information to be gathered to support learning. M&E is embedded from the outset through a requirement for explicit M&E planning and a specific budget line for this to be included in all proposals. For every project, baseline, midline and endline evaluations are required to determine what has been achieved as the project progresses. In addition, award holders must submit an M&E plan which includes theory of change, logframe and gender strategy; and cost-effectiveness analysis, a sustainability plan and a knowledge sharing & communication plan are required. Beyond the project level, Caribou Space conducts evaluation at the programme level against a programmatic of theory of change, as well as conducting a cost-effectiveness analysis, which compiles and builds on award-level cost-effectiveness analyses which compare space-based solutions to other options. To support learning, there is a requirement that evaluations include actionable recommendations, both at award and programme levels.

We see comparable approaches for some of the larger scale UKRI investments – specifically the Hubs, where a theory of change and logframe is in place for each Hub, and regular review processes are required. These include an annual review process, as well as an in-depth review at the two-year point including a stage gate process in which independent reviewers assess progress, provide feedback and recommend whether funding should be continued. The annual review exercise in 2020 provided specific feedback to individual Hubs to act on, as well as cross-cutting feedback across the Hubs. Action on that feedback will form part of the assessment in the stage gate process.

There are, therefore, examples where monitoring and evaluation activities are helping to reinforce the strategic direction set by the awards process (requiring attention to both research and ODA excellence) by including midline and endline checks. Despite these examples of good practice, however, the evidence of learning between programmes, between DPs and at the Fund level, is limited.

A number of factors may be restricting the opportunities for learning. These include the quality and consistency of data available, resourcing challenges (which may also vary across contexts) and limitations of existing tools and data collection approaches. These are explored in more detail below.

## 5.2 Data collection approaches differ across DPs and programmes, creating challenges in portfolio-level oversight and sharing insights

**A key challenge and limitation in terms of gaining insights across the Fund and sharing learning across DPs is the variation in different M&E approaches and data collection mechanisms.** As noted above, BEIS-level systems are being developed which aim to provide some consistency in data collection across the entire portfolio. However, to date the picture is fragmented, and even obtaining a comprehensive picture on the range and nature of research funded within the GCRF portfolio is a challenge. The BEIS tracker provides a partial picture at this level but has limitations and inconsistencies.

The development of RODA is intended to start to address this challenge, along with the rolling introduction of KPIs. However, this lack of standardisation in reporting is longstanding, having already been highlighted by the Foundation Stage evaluation, and, to some extent at least, would appear to be inherent in the exercise of gathering data from a diverse collection of partners, each with their own well-established data collection processes and procedures.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, RODA and KPIs should find a way to arrive at some standardisation while recognising that there will be some variation in data collection at DP level.

M&E approaches differ between DPs and programmes for several reasons. Part of this is a result of the underlying approaches in place at each DP for their wider research portfolios predating and outside of GCRF. For example, all the Research Councils use Researchfish as part of their M&E toolkit with award holders. This requires them to report outputs and outcomes annually for the duration of their award and five years afterwards. By contrast, the Academies (with the exception of AMS) do not use this tool and instead capture information – typically along the lines of annual and/or end-of-grant narrative reporting – in their ‘Flexigrant’ system.

Another reason for differences in M&E approaches is the differing scale and nature of awards. For example, the type of M&E that is appropriate for a project award may be very different to that which is appropriate for a networking award or event. Similarly, the extent and nature of monitoring will be different for large-scale awards as opposed to smaller grants. The extensive M&E approaches outlined above for the Hubs and UKSA awards would not be appropriate for

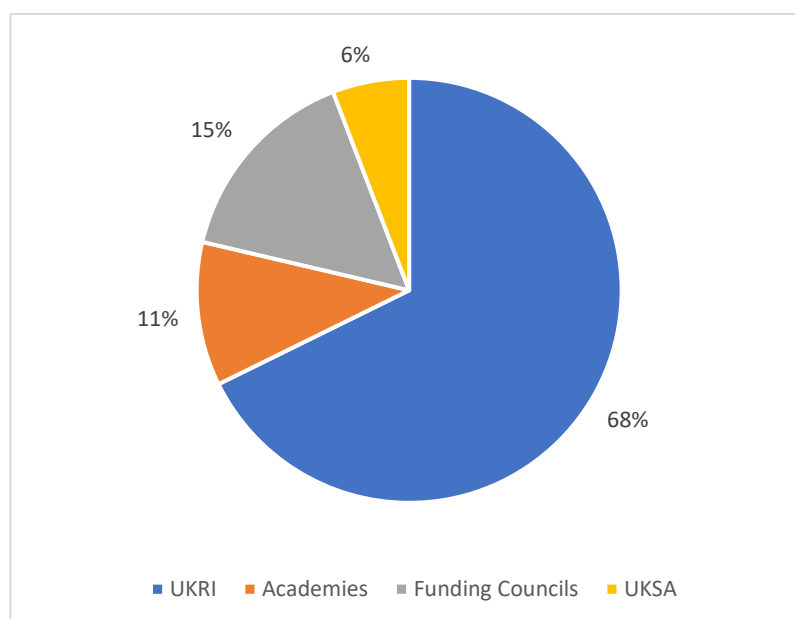
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<sup>59</sup> Barr J, Bryan B, Kolarz P, *et al.*, 2018. *GCRF Evaluation Foundation Stage – Final Report*. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/810137/GCRF\\_Evaluation\\_Foundation\\_Stage\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/810137/GCRF_Evaluation_Foundation_Stage_Final_Report.pdf) (Accessed 17 November 2020).

small awards, and, as illustrated in our portfolio analysis,<sup>60</sup> there is an extremely wide range of award sizes within the GCRF portfolio.

A key challenge underlying some of these issues is the difference in scale and resourcing across the DPs. We note that more than two-thirds of GCRF funding is allocated via UKRI (see Figure 7). For some of the DPs with smaller allocations of funding, resourcing is not sufficient to appoint dedicated MEL staff for the GCRF portfolio; as such, this role is covered by programme managers, and consequently the capacity to respond to data requests and deliver a comprehensive programme of MEL activities is limited. This was raised as a concern by respondents across several of the DPs and BEIS. This implies a need for either additional centralised support from BEIS and/or UKRI to wider DPs, or additional support and resourcing to enable MEL to be better embedded into those DPs. However, improved resourcing alone may not be sufficient to improve the consistency, quality and availability of data to support insights and learning. Improvements in communication and relationships between DPs and BEIS and across DPs will also be necessary, as well as careful consideration of which MEL approaches are likely to most effective and efficient, as set out below.

**Figure 7: Division of GCRF funding across different types of DPs.**



Source: BEIS Tracker data. Note Funding Councils operate very differently to other DPs due to the nature of QR funding.

The purpose of MEL activities should be clear and specified, and where there is limited capacity efforts should be focused on activities which can best support learning once ODA commitments and requirements are met. **One clear issue emerging from the analysis, which may be linked to the differential resourcing issue identified above, is a tension between BEIS and DPs regarding requests for data in relation to MEL.** For some within BEIS, there is a view that DPs are ‘reluctant’ to share data, and unwilling to share certain types of information with BEIS. It has been suggested that this may be related to concerns about the

<sup>60</sup> ITAD, 2020. *GCRF evaluation Inception report*.

purposes for which BEIS will use data (for example, to compare DPs) or concerns that the data will be misinterpreted, as well as concerns about ensuring GDPR requirements are adhered to.

The perspective from DPs on this is different. Across DPs, we see suggestions from some that M&E-related data requests from BEIS can be onerous, ad-hoc and with a short turnaround. One BEIS interviewee also recognised that there has been a lack of coordination in the information requests made to DPs by different workstreams within BEIS. Increased clarity on the reason for and intended use of data requested, and advance notice of these requests, may support better data sharing and openness. Demonstrating the benefits of pooling data for DPs – and ensuring that they have the access to the data needed to realise those benefits – could also support increased willingness to disclose information, particularly reflecting the point raised by some interviewees that they have little sight of the wider portfolio of GCRF research beyond their own DP context.

It is also worth noting that several DPs highlight that the level of scrutiny and M&E requirements placed on GCRF funding is significantly higher than for other parts of their portfolio. For example, according to UKRI, ODA programmes are monitored in greater detail than anything else UKRI does. However, this may be expected, given that this funding is part of ODA and hence has the requirement to demonstrate ODA compliance. It is also worth highlighting that some of the concerns around the level of oversight may be due to a lack of familiarity with ODA funds and the requirements associated with these. Many DPs will have limited knowledge and experience of ODA compliance requirements, leading to dissatisfaction with the level of assessment required and needed compared to R&I from other sources.

Another tension concerns formal and informal channels to support learning and knowledge exchange. Given concerns around potential 'silos' within the portfolio, the development of networks and working groups to facilitate cross-DP and cross-programme learning may well be appropriate. However, there is a wide range of such forums and, as noted by one interviewee, this 'proliferation of working groups' can be inefficient and might well reflect a duplication of effort.

There is also evidence from some programmes and DPs that effective learning may be emerging through more informal channels. For example, in the FLAIR programme, the Royal Society held a two-day induction workshop for the first cohort to learn more about the support award holders would like to receive and their expectations of the programme. This has informed future rounds of the programme and has also fed into wider activities for the Royal Society's partner organisation for this programme, the African Academy of Sciences. It was also suggested by MRC that in terms of their relationships with award holders, and also in terms of learning and improvement, informal conversations may be the most useful mechanism rather than more formal M&E systems.

This is in line with wider observations about scale of DPs and efficiency. MEL processes need to be sufficient to serve the needs of the programmes and the Fund and deliver learning but should still give space for those productive informal mechanisms of feedback and learning to occur. There is a risk that formal data collection may crowd out the time and space needed for



'softer' learning channels to deliver benefits. However, this also needs to be considered in the context that, as ODA funding, monitoring to ensure ODA compliance to a certain level will always be necessary.

Considerations of resourcing, efficiency, willingness to share data, and limitations on the nature and extent of the learning culture within the Fund are all interlinked. If the clear benefits of MEL processes through insight, learning and improvement were evident, then this could drive increased willingness to engage. It would also make the case effectively for further investment of resources and time in the efforts needed to improve consistency and comparability of data.

The current situation may be a 'vicious cycle' in which these interconnected factors are self-reinforcing and limit the effectiveness of efforts to improve and develop MEL within GCRF. However, efforts are ongoing to improve and streamline centralised data collection mechanisms through the development of KPIs and implementation of RODA, as well as the ongoing Fund-wide evaluation. This presents an opportunity to 'break the cycle' and deliver a more engaged, cross-fund learning culture.

## 6. Value for Money

This section addresses the evaluation question: ‘To what extent are systems in place to support and help manage the delivery of value for money?’ We leave discussion about the costs and consequences of GCRF until a later module. Here we are focused on the prior question of how well designed and managed GCRF is to deliver value for money.

### Box 13. Value for Money – overview of key observations

- **GCRF faces challenges in assessing Value for Money, reflecting common issues for both development and R&I portfolios, and these can seem overwhelming; a suitable response is to focus on cost control and efficiently producing outputs:** The GCRF is expected to deliver value through a value chain that involves supporting research-driven, innovative and transformational ways to meet the needs of the world’s poorest. This involves many causal steps only some of which the Fund can control or even influence. Good management in delivering value for money involves delivering activities that maximise the likelihood of this value being created while simultaneously controlling its costs. We identify cost control and efficiency as two short-term areas for action to support VfM. We identify opportunities to compare and learn across the Fund that would further strengthen VfM.
- **DPs report that they are aware of the importance of value for money but there is currently no consistent approach to measuring and delivering value for money:** VfM is agreed to be important among those responsible for the management of the GCRF. It is unclear what this general sense of importance means for specific and routine decision making across the range of GCRF activities. A Fund-wide framework to assess VfM would support more consistent VfM analysis, but only if supported by adequate resources and capabilities across the Fund to implement it.
- **Comparative Value for Money analysis is a key driver of improvement and the variety within GCRF could be leveraged to support this.** Comparing how economically, efficiently or effectively others have been in delivering similar impacts is fundamental to improvement. The variety and differences within GCRF could become a way to share practice, learn and improve. Examples we identify include how to manage variations in the size of projects within a programme and how to maximise the efficiency of partnership working. A Fund-wide VfM framework – which is being developed – would make this type of comparative analysis more feasible.
- **Good examples of minimising costs without compromising quality exist within the Fund:** Maximising VfM includes bearing down on costs. Good examples demonstrate what is possible, but they are not spread across GCRF, which a Fund-wide framework could facilitate if well-socialised and resourced.

- **GCRF is effective at identifying direct project outputs which are immediate and tangible, but less effective when identifying the often more indirect and intangible outputs from capacity building and system change:** Maximising VfM also involves making judgements about the value created. This can be hard to do when the benefits are long-term, intangible and indirect. An important first step to deliver maximum value is to be able to explicitly identify what the intended impacts look like (even where these cannot be quantified). Progress is being made in this respect with the development of a Fund-wide VfM framework and further monitoring will strengthen this further.
- **Ensuring equity through fairness to Global South researchers entails challenges that can best be managed through addressing funding and accountability systems:** Suggested reasons for Global South researchers not always being included on an equitable basis were often concerned with delivery and accountability rather than with any apparent resistance to more equitable working. Improvements might be expected if these systemic issues were addressed. However, if accountability and cost control were over-emphasised, equity might suffer.

## 6.1 GCRF faces challenges in assessing Value for Money, reflecting common issues for both development and R&I portfolios; a suitable short-term response is to focus on cost control and efficiency while focusing in the medium term on effectiveness and impact

**In common with many UK and international approaches, our starting point for defining VfM is based on the NAO conceptualisation of VfM (also adopted by ICAI), as comprising the four Es: economy, efficiency, effectiveness and equity.**<sup>61</sup> The four Es can helpfully be seen to feature at different timepoints – before, during and after each GCRF grant (and in turn programmes, and the Fund as a whole). To date, VfM considerations by GCRF implementers have particularly focused on pre-grant bid assessments,<sup>62</sup> and part of the work of this evaluation (in collaboration with BEIS analysts also working on this) is to develop an approach for assessing VfM during and after projects. Developing and applying this approach further is scheduled to take place in subsequent modules of the evaluation.

A first challenge to successfully managing to deliver value for money is to understand and assess the value of impacts. There are recognised difficulties in measuring both research

<sup>61</sup> Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI), 2018. DFID's approach to value for money in programme and portfolio management: A performance review. Available at: <https://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/DFIDs-approach-to-value-for-money-ICAI-review.pdf> (Accessed on 7 December 2020).

<sup>62</sup> For instance, at UKSA VfM is a heavily weighted criterion for assessing bids.

impact<sup>63</sup> and sustainable development impacts.<sup>64</sup> These are amplified when an impact is also to deliver innovation; innovation involves failure as well as success, so the impact of innovation needs to look at a whole portfolio of projects. The challenges for GCRF in measuring the value created can be summarised as:

3. **What to include as costs:** Research, innovation and international development draw upon prior efforts. However, including prior costs is problematic. Furthermore, interdependencies in complex systems confound simple measurements and therefore confound clear VfM statements. Such interdependencies often involve things that are necessary but not sufficient to deliver the intended outcomes and impacts.
4. **How to define and measure value in different contexts:** The GCRF research portfolio is broad and diverse, and how value is created and costs controlled varies from one part of the Fund to another. This strengthens the argument that VfM calls should be contextualised and tailored approaches rather than a 'one size fits all' approach. This should also be kept in mind when undertaking VfM comparisons across projects, award holders or delivery partners. For example, a project might reach only a small group and rank poorly in terms of economic gains but rank highly in terms of equity and fairness. Similarly, the GCRF also funds 'upstream activities' (e.g. capacity building, networking, partnerships, fellowships, learning activities) alongside more 'downstream activities' to support how research knowledge might be mobilised and innovations developed and marketed. Both upstream and downstream activities deliver their value through outcomes which they may influence but do not control. Understanding this influence is often hard to quantify.
5. **Understanding when benefits might be expected:** The VfM judgement is often time dependent, with some research delivering great value but only after many years. It is often difficult in advance to judge the future value of projects and programmes.
6. **VfM and innovation:** Innovations and cutting-edge research of the sort aspired to in GCRF will include projects which may be very well-founded but nevertheless fail; narrow measurements of VfM may punish justified risk taking and discourage future innovation. There are also challenges in attribution – since innovations often result from multiple contributing factors including multiple R&I efforts but also wider social, economic and political factors. We also note the data issues when looking at projects that may have value across multiple countries, often with very different and sometimes limited data collection environments.

Faced with this difficulty of measuring the value of final impacts (the far-right-hand side of the Theory of Change) can discourage efforts to manage for VfM. A more suitable approach to

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<sup>63</sup> Tuffaha H, El-Saifi N and Scuffham P, 2018. *Value For Money, the Overlooked Aspect in Research Funding Decisions*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jval.2018.07.413>

<sup>64</sup> Jackson P, 2012. *Value for money and international development*. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/49652541.pdf>

have management and processes that focus on cost controls and efficiently producing measurable outputs in the short term, while attending to ultimate impacts in the longer term.

There is ongoing work between UKRI and BEIS to develop a formal framework for VfM assessment, but currently awareness of the importance of VfM at UKRI, DP and programme levels has not delivered a consistent understanding of what VfM should mean for how the GCRF is managed. In terms of strategy, only some delivery partners emphasise the four Es in their approach, depending on factors such as their wider practice.<sup>65</sup> In terms of practice, reflecting different portfolios of work and different organisational cultures, delivery partners implement VfM approaches in different ways. For example, UKSA have introduced a requirement for midline and endline evaluations to use DFID's VfM framework qualitatively, while others identified challenges surrounding how to quantify impacts such as policy-level achievements.

So in the long term there are improvements that could be achieved by a focus on greater effectiveness and more measurement of impacts to address how research might be mobilised and innovations delivered (these remain important and will be considered in later modules). But in the short run, based on our interviews, VfM would be most quickly strengthened by focusing on efficiency (how resources are used to create outputs that are relevant and fit for purpose) and on bearing down on costs. These are more directly in the control of GCRF and should be prioritised. We discuss these in the following two sections.

## 6.2 Interviewees were aware of the importance of value for money but do not have a structured and aligned approach to follow; a helpful place to start would be to focus on efficiency

**Developing a structured and aligned approach could helpfully start with a greater focus on efficiency.** 'Efficiency' concerns how well inputs are used to create outputs that are of the quality and relevance needed. Focusing on efficiency involves levers over which DPs have control and processes with which the UK R&I community is familiar. For GCRF this entails using its resources (funding, scientific knowledge, skills, staff, relationships) well to achieve outputs that have the required standards of quality, relevance, inclusivity and range. Later modules will consider in detail the question of effectiveness (turning quality research and capacity building outputs into impacts that will deliver the Fund aims) using an economics-based approach. In this section we outline findings relating to approaches taken to strengthen efficiency in particular.

We found routine ways of working that weakened efficiency. For example, SFC note that there is a mismatch in the timelines for budget allocation from BEIS (by financial year) and internal funding processes for HEIs (academic year). It was reported that this creates very tight timelines, potentially requiring money to be spent quickly, with potentially negative consequences. Improved efficiency would be achieved with better-aligned timescales that

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<sup>65</sup> Interdisciplinary Research Hubs do, while Demonstrate Impact Programme do not.

support how VfM is managed. However, changing these processes may not necessarily be straightforward.

Project size is another efficiency consideration where sharing and comparing approaches might support cross-fund learning. On the one hand, larger projects are seen by some to be more efficient. ESRC, for example, explained that their larger projects entail lower relative proportion of administrative costs compare to overall budgets. The Royal Society explained they find it is hard to assess the efficiency of smaller projects. However, it is also worth noting that we were told by others that smaller projects can find it easier to demonstrate short-term achievements.

It is unlikely that there would be a 'one size fits all' approach, but more systematic learning would support better choices concerning the size of projects within each portfolio and how VfM approaches should be adapted to smaller or larger projects. Comparing approaches and understanding how challenges in one part of the Fund have been overcome is an important part of the cycle of delivering VfM.

Another example where comparing value for money might drive improvement is in partnerships. How best to set up partnerships is an issue which highlights the challenges GCRF decision makers face when seeking to deliver and demonstrate efficiency improvements. On the one hand, taking advantage of existing relationships allows a more rapid response and is likely to be easier to manage, building as it does on existing relationships, and also promotes sustainability of those relationships over time. On the other hand, this may both reinforce existing inequalities of access and result in valuable contributions being missed. Faced with these choices, at least one programme explained they therefore typically build on existing networks. The efficiency and effectiveness of partnership working is central to delivering value for money, but decisions in relation to partnership working appear to depend more on habitual routines than on learning from across the Fund about what delivers the best VfM.

We also considered with interviewees whether competition supports or detracts from efficiency. Competition can be beneficial, encouraging each proposal to maximise quality and reduce costs in order to increase the likelihood of success. However, a high number of unsuccessful bids can suggest an inefficient process requiring a lot of potentially wasted work by the majority of (unsuccessful) applicants. Once again the approach adopted appears often to reflect habitual ways of working rather than a calculation of what would deliver the best value for money.

Finally, Covid-19 has inevitably had a multitude of impacts on efficiencies, but one positive has been that an increased number of online events is seen as being more cost effective (as costs are lower, but with the assumption that the benefits are similar to those associated with face-to-face events).

## 6.3 Good examples of minimising costs without compromising quality exist but are unevenly spread across the Fund

**Economy entails minimising costs without compromising quality or equity, and there are some examples where DPs address this.** Competition among providers is a key mechanism to support economy but is only one consideration among others when making an award. On its own, competition between research entities based upon peer review is not a sufficient means to ensure ongoing cost control. Competition is certainly not the only mechanism used to manage costs in GCRF and we found examples of efforts to improve economy, including: instances of delivery partners and programmes periodically reviewing grantee costs; ensuring that awards avoid duplications; withholding payment where activity has not taken place as planned; some check which expenditures are allowable for each grant application, others emphasise comparing salaries across awardees while others seek to minimise overheads and administrative costs relative to funding project activities. However, we were also told of instances where delivery partners had to respond to pressure to spend out grant money to time and quality and that this might outweigh such efforts to limit costs.

## 6.4 GCRF is effective at identifying (anticipated) direct project outputs; identifying and measuring capacity building and transformational innovations should be a medium-term aspiration

**Currently, processes in place do not allow a holistic assessment of the value created by the Fund.** Based on the GCRF's strategic aims<sup>66</sup> the value created by the Fund includes three things: 1) challenge-led high-quality research and innovation, with strong potential for contributing to tangible development impact; 2) capacity building both in the Global South and in the UK to identify needs, generate and mobilise knowledge, and support innovations; and 3) a research and innovation system that is agile and responsive to the needs of the world's poorest.

Evidence gathered from delivery partners and programmes shows that those implementing the GCRF do recognise the importance of all three levels, but do not have a strong system for assessing how well they are managing to deliver against levels 2 and 3. This affects stakeholders' ability to inform decisions about the relative value of one set of investments over another, or how to learn and adapt over time.

Direct project benefits have several components, and various methods are used to capture these. The most available and comprehensive tool for assessing project impacts is Researchfish, but it is not all-encompassing and can perhaps be most usefully seen as a

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<sup>66</sup> *UK Strategy for the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF)*. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/623825/global-challenges-research-fund-gcrf-strategy.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/623825/global-challenges-research-fund-gcrf-strategy.pdf)

starting point for analysis of benefits. It is also not seen by all as a 'quantitative indicator' – although it has some quantitative components. Some delivery partners have therefore developed more stringent reporting requirements for its grantee, requiring award holders to be clear about what the intended impacts of their expenditures are and who the research will benefit. One example is UKSA's focus on the extent to which grant applications offer usable innovations to end users in developing countries. There is also an understanding that wider measures are needed to look at change 'on the ground' and policy influence.

Capacity development is linked to the development of partnerships – where we have already identified challenges. Capacity building is partly addressed in section 3.2, regarding the tension that while it is quicker and cheaper to use existing networks, this may reinforce existing inequalities and also result in important contributions being missed. There remains a need for active cultivation of partnerships, not least for reasons of equity (elaborated in section 3.4). Other examples of capacity building provided by programmes include training activities and networking opportunities. Measuring capacity building in real time is an acknowledged challenge in evaluating research capacity building in developing countries<sup>67</sup> and care should be taken to avoid overburdening projects. There may be a programme or Fund-level approach needed to both assess and improve capacity building.

Finally, there are examples of programmes focused on the third benefits level; that of system strengthening. One example is a greater number of collaborations between research investors in Africa, and another is award holders' income streams becoming more sustainable through non-GCRF funding and 'pump-priming'. These straddle both the second and third levels of GCRF benefits and would similarly benefit from programme or Fund-level assessments.

## 6.5 Ensuring equitability through fairness to Global South researchers is not adequately supported by current ways of working

**An equitable GCRF would mean its activities and achievements demonstrate fairness of outcomes for researchers and research institutions and for endline beneficiaries who are underserved by existing research arrangements (spending fairly).** Our analysis of delivery partners and programmes suggests the focus relating to equity is primarily on the extent to which the GCRF empowers research partners in the Global South. While the emphasis on capacity building is important, for some interviewees the focus of ensuring equitability through 'empowering' is first and foremost about funding of overseas partners. Delivery partners, while aware of this issue, do not all directly fund overseas partners, as explored in section 3.2.

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<sup>67</sup> Marjanovic S, Cochrane G, Robin E, *et al.*, 2017. *Evaluating a complex research capacity-building intervention: Reflections on an evaluation of the African Institutions Initiative*. 2017;23(1):80-101. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1356389016682759>



For example, for ESRC the barriers that have not yet been resolved are firstly that opening up applications entails a significant burden on proposal assessment resources, and secondly that their financial due diligence will need to accommodate different international approaches for audit and accounts. The suggestions made above regarding how to ensure that competition supports rather than detracts from efficiencies are relevant here, but equally the processes surrounding due diligence may need to be adapted if such barriers are to be surmounted.

Equity considerations are currently focused on building partnerships and capacities rather than wider considerations of equity and fairness. Ensuring equity is not only about directly funding existing research entities in the Global South (important though this is) and existing partners are not always disempowered through GCRF. However, the current approach to partnership working (with priorities set at or below DP level) creates few incentives to seek out new and potentially more innovative partners. Indeed, by privileging the importance of research quality and timely responses to bids, award holders may find themselves pulled towards existing relationships. Overcoming this challenge may require creating alternative mechanisms to fund and engage new partners.

As also explored in more detail in our Fairness module, the pursuit of fairness in GCRF is mainly approached through the lens of strengthening existing partners from the Global South. One consequence of this is that most of the grant funding to the South ends up in middle-income countries. Furthermore, regarding fairness of outcomes for endline beneficiaries needs to be more visible. Two programmes (at least) see this as a priority, with examples being equipment donation to LMICs and the establishment of PhD studentships that address gaps.

Equity and fairness are the focus of a separate module in this evaluation and will be considered in more detail in subsequent reports.

## 7. Lessons from comparator funds

In this section we consider what lessons might be gained for GCRF by looking at how comparator funds manage their business.

### Box 14. Lessons from comparator funds – overview of key observations

- **Comparator research funds have adopted a range of different approaches to strategy development:** Strategies aim to deliver success against strategic priorities while being flexible and agile enough to learn from experience and respond to unforeseen change. Our review finds that the ways in which comparator fund-level strategy influences approaches at the delivery partner and programme levels varies. Research funds differ on the use of centralised or decentralised models and the level of oversight used.
- **There are different approaches to including the assessment of development outcomes in proposal review:** Assessing development impact at the proposal stage is often a challenge, in part because what is meant by ‘development relevance’ is hard to define, compared to ‘academic quality’. Some funds have robust frameworks for considering factors beyond research quality when assessing proposals. Others ensure balanced representation of review panels and consider factors such as equity of partnership. Comparators provide examples of how useful frameworks for assessment of development impacts can be implemented at a Fund level.
- **Flexible or tailored approaches to M&E can be used to reflect the diversity and differential resourcing of different aspects of a fund’s portfolio:** Reporting should be proportional to the value of the project, as well as the activity across the various comparator funds, while ensuring some level of M&E. UK Funds use Researchfish alongside bespoke frameworks. There is a challenge for the funder between the role of auditor and adviser – particularly where grantees have not previously had funding from UK organisations.
- **There are different ways that funds can adapt and learn:** Alongside having a clear strategy and objectives it is important to be adaptable to ensure funds can learn from experience and develop over time. Formal evaluations (ex post and real-time) are mechanisms for learning, but informal mechanisms, such as input from stakeholders, are also valuable and can support agility.
- **Timeliness of funding is a common challenge for UK research funds:** Two of the three UK funds looked at (SPF and FIC) reported delays in funding, particularly in the start-up phase of the fund, and this appears to be a common challenge for UK

R&I funds which need to adapt to changing levels of resourcing and potentially short funding time horizons driven by the Treasury.

## 7.1 Details of comparator funds reviewed

Having explored some of the challenges faced in setting up, implementing and evaluating the GCRF, we undertook six comparator case studies to understand what could be learned from funds with similar complexity, both in the UK and overseas.

The comparators were:

### **Conflict, Security and Stability Fund (CSSF) (UK)**

The Conflict, Security and Stability Fund (CSSF) is a cross-government ODA fund which supports and delivers activity to tackle instability and prevent conflicts that may threaten UK interests. The CSSF, launched in 2015, has a budget of approximately £1.2 billion and is managed by the Joint Funds Unit (JFU), FCDO. The fund currently operates in over 70 countries and has contributed to a wide range of activities, including: supporting Lebanese armed forces to secure their borders with Syria; support to the government of Colombia to implement the peace agreement and tackle threats from serious and organised crime; and supporting Pakistan's Election Commission to bolster women's participation in elections. An ICAI report in 2018 identified areas for improvement within CSSF, and made several recommendations, including: the need for greater country and regional plans on how activities contribute to the National Security Council objectives; greater identification of programmes on how they identify, manage and mitigate risks of doing harm; more adequate results management and assessment of value for money; creation of conditions required for a more thorough evaluation of the CSSF portfolio; and more effort to gather and synthesise evidence on learning from the programmes. Since these recommendations were made, a follow-up report by ICAI found that the CSSF had achieved significant progress in response to many of the recommendations.

### **Fund for International Collaboration (FIC) (UK)**

The Fund for International Collaboration (FIC) was announced in November 2017 as part of the UK's industrial strategy, with the primary aim to enhance the UK's excellence in research and innovation through global engagement. FIC aims to support researchers and innovators to collaborate with international partners in countries with high-performing research and innovation sectors, enabling the UK to develop strategic partnerships with global R&D leaders. The fund contains 29 programmes in total, with most of the funds allocated across two waves, with a combined value of approximately £160 million and with

project values ranging from £600,000 to £11.2 million. In addition, in order to have funding for emerging challenges, a smaller amount of funding (£14 million) was designated for a strategic opportunities stream. The areas of research are varied and include projects on environmental research, such as: advances in crop breeding and healthy soils; projects on human health and disease, such as healthy ageing; anti-microbial resistance and diabetes; projects on digital technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence, as well as their impact on society; and projects involving the physical sciences, such as research into photonics.

### **Strategic Priorities Fund (SPF) (UK)**

The Strategic Priorities Fund (SPF) is a cross-UKRI fund that aims to increase multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research and innovation; ensure that UKRI investments link up effectively with government research and innovation priorities; and ensure that the research system responds to strategic opportunities and priorities. The fund was established in 2018 and the SPF portfolio consists of 34 programmes with a combined total investment of approximately £830 million, distributed across the two waves so far. Within each wave, programmes are clustered within the themes: these are collaborative programmes and are delivered by two or more of the UKRI councils and other public sector funding organisations. Eligible researchers include those at a higher education institution, research institute, or independent organisation accredited by UKRI, as well as those who are employed at an eligible public sector research establishment; and some programmes are open to businesses.

### **International Development Research Centre (IDRC) (Canada)**

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is a Canadian ‘Crown corporation’ established to fund research in developing countries that will ‘promote growth, reduce poverty and drive large-scale positive change’. IDRC was established in 1970 by an Act of the Canadian parliament. In 2019–2020 the total value of new projects approved with IDRC and co-donor funds was \$166.4 million (approximately £96.2 million). Research supported by IDRC falls under three broad programme areas: inclusive economies, agriculture and environment, and technology and innovation. Under these three areas, IDRC operates eight programmes addressing specific development themes. These programmes are: governance and justice; employment and growth; maternal and child health; agriculture and food security; climate change; food environment and health; foundations for innovation; networked economies. IDRC also maintains ‘flexible funds’ enabling the Centre to respond to emerging opportunities that fall outside its main funding programmes. IDRC offers a range of funding types, including research grants, capacity building grants, fellowships and awards to researchers and institutions. A key focus of IDRC is to establish partnerships with

other development funders, including public funding bodies, aid agencies and private sector and philanthropic organisations.

### **NORHED (Norway)**

NORHED is a Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) funding programme which aims to 'strengthen the capacity of higher education institutions in developing countries to produce higher-quality graduates, more and higher-quality research, and more inclusive higher education'. NORHED focusses on North–South university partnerships for projects on capacity development in higher education and research. Projects must be based on partner institutions' identification of needs and contextual relevance. Established in 2012, NORHED's first programme (NORHED I) ran from 2013 to 2019. The overall budget for NORHED I was approximately NOK 150 million per year (NOK 900 million, or £77 million, overall). Building on the lessons learned from NORHED I, the second NORHED programme (NORHED II) will run between 2021 and 2026, with the possibility of a two-year extension. Over the course of the programme, NORHED II will distribute 'more than NOK 1 billion' (£86 million) to education and research projects between Norway and Global South partners. NORHED funding is available for higher education institutions (HEIs) in Norway and low- to middle-income countries (LMICs) as partnership collaborations. To be eligible for funding, applicant must present a joint project plan designating responsibilities and roles across institutions, as well as a 'partnership committee' to ensure 'partner dialogue, monitoring and adjustment of implementation'. A key focus of both NORHED programmes is to support high-quality research and education that builds institutional capacity and addresses pressing societal issues in LMICs.

### **Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for Development (r4d) (Switzerland)**

The Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for Development (r4d Programme) is a joint funding initiative between the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) to support research aimed at solving development challenges in low- and middle-income countries. Established in 2012, the r4d Programme is a 10-year programme with an allocated budget of CHF 97.6 million (approximately £80.1 million).

The r4d Programme supports research across five thematic 'modules': social conflicts, employment, food security, ecosystems, and public health. A 'thematically open module' also provides support for research projects falling outside of these thematic areas. Since

2012, the r4d Programme has supported 57 research projects involving more than 290 grantees and spanning 50 countries.

To be eligible for r4d funding, applicants must be employed by a Swiss research institution but have transnational partnerships with at least one institution in a low- or middle-income country. A key focus of the r4d Programme is to support interdisciplinary research that is both problem- and solution-oriented.

Detailed write-ups of these can be found in Annex C. These case studies were descriptive rather than evaluative; hence in this chapter we do not seek to suggest whether certain processes work better than others, but rather to present strategies and challenges others have faced, so that GCRF might consider these going forwards.

## 7.2 Research funds requiring a level of coherence use a fixed but adaptable strategic framework

**Across the funds reviewed there was a range of strategies for ensuring a focus on strategic priorities while being flexible and agile enough to learn from experience and respond to unforeseen change.** For example, r4d has a fixed strategic framework. According to interviewees, however, this framework is broad enough to allow the programme to adapt to change. The adaptability of the programme has been demonstrated by the launch of new thematic calls in response to an initial underspend of funds.

The IDRC also emphasised the need for adaptability of strategy and responsiveness to change while adopting a long-term strategy. This has been achieved in Canada through the adoption of strategic plans developed through a ‘consultative’ approach (gathering both internal and external perspectives) which reflects on what is (and is not) working well. NORHED has taken the end of the first programme (which ran in 2013–2019) to reflect and develop NORHED II (running from 2021). Norad has changed its strategic approach, with the preferred agreement partner shifting from a Southern-based HEI to a Norwegian one.

**Research funds differ on the use of centralised or decentralised models, and the level of oversight used.** For example, the CSSF is managed by a Joint Funds Unit, set up to provide greater strategic and ministerial oversight, following the National Security Capability Review in 2018. This ensures there is oversight at the portfolio level, along with monitoring and evaluation and good practice management. Interviewees report that this structure has helped with coordination and coherence, although they recognise this is an ongoing challenge.

In comparison, FIC uses a combination of top-down and bottom-up management which they report has worked well. For example, the FIC central team manage the strategic direction and overall aims of the Fund, as well as the development of the assessment criteria for the project

bids. They are supported by the FIC panel who oversee and ensure balance across the portfolio, as well as enabling cohesion across the fund. This top-down approach to managing risk and overseeing the portfolio is complemented by bottom-up engagement from the research councils and research community.

UKRI councils are responsible for developing their own activities, which they put forward for funding, although ultimately the decision-making lies with the FIC central team in UKRI. For example, the FIC central team is responsible for reallocating underspent funding. SPF uses a decentralised model, enabling UKRI councils and other delivery partners to deliver their programmes in the way they view most appropriate for their specific programme aims, as long as they are in line with the core SPF objectives.

These examples illustrate that there is no existing uniformity on the level of oversight that funders and delivery partners should have and how cohesive a fund should be – for example, by theme or location. However, GCRF's dispersed and devolved management structure is less common in a programme aiming to achieve coherence across its portfolio, particularly in a development context.

## 7.3 There are different approaches to including the review of development impact in the proposal assessment

**Assessing development impact at the proposal stage can be a challenge, in part because what is meant by 'development relevance' is less easily defined, compared with academic quality.** The three funds reviewed from outside the UK (R4d, NORHED and IDRC) all focus, like GCRF, on international development, and therefore seek to balance research quality and development relevance. Some funds set up robust frameworks for considering factors beyond research quality when assessing proposals. For example, IDRC have considered how to assess the development-relevant aspects of research and the potential of the research to achieve development impact.

IDRC have looked to develop robust frameworks for this purpose and have adapted the Research Quality (RQ)+ framework – initially developed for ex post evaluation of research – for ex ante proposal evaluation. RQ+ provides a holistic rubric for evaluating research based on both its scientific merit but also a wider range of factors (including engagement of local stakeholders, use of participatory research methods, and knowledge accessibility and readiness for sharing) considered to be important to ensure the impact of the research. The framework is divided into four dimensions of research quality: research integrity; research legitimacy; research importance; and positioning for use. This framework is incorporated into both its proposal evaluation processes and its monitoring and evaluation work.

R4d reported that they address the issue by ensuring balanced representation of review panels, giving review panels adequate time to discuss and evaluate project proposals, and effectively communicating proposal evaluation criteria to the research community.

**In NORHED, the equity of partnership is formally considered, as well as quality and relevance.**<sup>68</sup> The elements are weighted 50:30:20 for quality, relevance and equity of partnerships respectively, so that, above all, high-quality projects are prioritised in the scheme. Proposals are first reviewed by a panel of international senior academics, who review the excellence and equitable partnership criteria, forwarding the strongest proposals onto further review.

The next step is completed by officials in the relevant countries' embassies. These individuals bring expert knowledge of the country and relevant institutions; they have a deep understanding of risk management and 'know on the ground what's needed' beyond what is presented on paper in the application. The embassy staff's review comments are limited to applications' relevance to in-country needs, making no academic assessments. Following this review stage, applications are passed on to experts in other technical departments within Norad, who can assess whether proposals duplicate, or align well, with pre-existing initiatives and other schemes; and the final funding decision is made by staff at Norad.

**The tension between working on basic capacity building with weaker institutions, or more equitable partnerships with stronger, more developed universities was highlighted by an interviewee from Norad.** The mid-term evaluation of NORHED I had recommended that Norad make a firm decision around institutions of focus; either on building more equitable research partnerships stronger institutions, or capacity building weaker institutions, and that they would not be able to do both.<sup>69</sup> Norad, however, have decided not to make a firm decision either way, believing that combining stronger and weaker institutions is key to sustainable development. Norad have sought to do both in NORHED II through a range of instruments – for example, networking multiple institutions in the Global South together with a Norwegian HEI rather than one-to-one relationships. In some cases GCRF could consider where funds could be allocated by the DPs and programmes to non-UK-based PIs and if this would have benefits.

## 7.4 Bringing together different actors helps foster relationships and communities, in the UK and internationally

**Funded collaborations extend beyond the scope of the funding and bring spill-over benefits.** For example, CSSF is a cross-government fund which, interviewees highlighted, enables UK government departments to work together, fostering greater collaboration beyond the fund. FIC involves both the UK and overseas partner councils in the funding decisions and the governance of the fund, building substantial international relationships and partnerships.

**Direct relationships between the funder and grant holder are beneficial to maximising understanding between the two groups.** Norad uses country embassy staff to visit projects and ensure an open dialogue with Southern partners. R4d stressed the importance of direct

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<sup>68</sup> For NORHED II, Norad have focused on 12 priority countries.

<sup>69</sup> M64.



contact with researchers in developing countries, in addition to its relationships with researchers in Swiss institutions.

**There is a challenge for the funder between the role of auditor and advisor.** For example, to promote Southern ownership and development collaboration, Norad devised a ‘South based’ model for NORHED I, where the preferred agreement partner would be in the Global South, not in Norway. This meant that LMIC HEIs had responsibility for submitting applications, and managing all financial aspects of the projects, to promote Southern ownership and capacity building. However, Norad have decided to shift the agreement partners in NORHED II to be a Norwegian HEI as Southern institutions do not have capacity (e.g. internal capabilities and infrastructure) to take on responsibilities associated with the agreement partner role (such as quality assuring and consolidating joint work, as well as financial management responsibility). This is interesting in the context of GCRFs current approach where in the majority of cases (but not all), funding is allocated through a UK HEI.

This echoes findings from other funds (such as IDRC) about the role that fund staff play in supporting and assisting grantees who may not be familiar with the funder’s processes and monitoring. This can be labour-intensive for the funder’s team and lead to project delays. It will be interesting to see how Norad maintain links with Southern institutions in NORHED II, without that regular engagement as a result of being funder and preferred agreement partner.

## 7.5 Flexible or tailored approaches to M&E can be used to reflect the diversity and differential resourcing of different aspects of a fund’s portfolio

**Reporting should be proportional to the value of the project, as well as the activity across the Fund, while ensuring some level of M&E. IDRC has different processes at the level of project, programme and organisation.** At the project level, evaluations are normally commissioned either by programme officers or grantees. Not all projects are subject to evaluation. Instead projects are selected based on factors such as the project risk, the learning potential of the project, and the size of the investment. At the programme level, evaluation is conducted either for whole programmes or for specific parts of programme portfolios. These programme evaluations are commissioned by external evaluation experts. In 2019–2020 IDRC undertook seven such programme-level evaluations.

Another category of programme-level evaluation is strategic learning studies, focused on specific cross-cutting issues, which typically cover a cluster of projects or programmes.<sup>70</sup> At the organisation level, IDRC conducts evaluations against strategic objectives to help the Centre understand its progress against its overarching Strategic Plan. IDRC also conducts targeted impact evaluations, the aim of which is to provide evidence of the impact of IDRC-funded

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<sup>70</sup> IDRC, 2017. *Evaluation at IDRC*. Available at: <https://www.idrc.ca/sites/default/files/sp/Documents%20EN/evaluation-at-idrc.pdf> (Accessed 17 December 2020).

research on people's lives or on the environment.<sup>71</sup> At the end of the 2015–2020 strategy period, IDRC also conducted a synthesis learning report. This drew on all its evaluations at the programme level and the strategic level to develop recommendations for the next strategic period.

**UK funds use Researchfish alongside bespoke frameworks.** FIC has a common and agreed reporting framework for quarterly reporting from Research Councils to the central team. Interviewees highlighted the use of narrative reporting to highlight early successes and unexpected results as an informative way to encourage the Research Councils to fill this information out. In addition to the standard annual reporting, through Researchfish, on the outcomes and outputs associated with programmes that all UKRI funded projects undertake, each programme funded by SPF has adopted a bespoke approach depending on the scale, programme complexity, and the expected outcomes or impacts relating to the programme.

This uses a decision-tree, developed by the NPIF Evaluation Oversight Board, to determine what kind of evaluation is suitable for each programme and considers the size of the programme, as well as the type of research involved. For example, smaller programmes may undergo in-house evaluation whereas larger programmes may be evaluated externally. In addition, how impact is determined may differ from programme to programme: for example, programmes that undertake basic research may be assessed on their contribution to the creation of knowledge whereas other programmes may undergo a more extensive impact evaluation.

## 7.6 There are different ways that funds can adapt and learn from experience

**Alongside having a clear strategy and objectives it is important to be adaptable to ensure the Fund can learn from experience and develop over time.** IDRC achieve this through the weight they place on learning as a purpose of their monitoring and evaluation activities. To ensure the results from the evaluation are internalised and reacted to, all programme-level evaluations require a management response. Although organisation-level evaluations (unlike programme evaluations) are not required to have management responses, all such evaluations are presented to the IDRC Board of Governors, thereby ensuring that any recommendations or learnings resulting from these evaluations are considered at the highest level. R4d uses information acquired through monitoring and evaluation to learn where researchers need support.

**Formal evaluations (ex post and real-time) are mechanisms for learning.** Both FIC and SPF have commissioned, and are currently undertaking, independent evaluations of the funds. These real-time evaluations at Fund level of the process and impact will last for the duration of the funds. As interim findings will be shared with stakeholders as the evaluations progresses there will be opportunities to shape the funds on an ongoing basis. This has been seen with

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

CSSF, where, in response to the 2018 ICAI review, the Fund has implemented several of the recommendations. These include increasing opportunities for more rigorous monitoring and evaluation, better learning across the Fund through better dissemination of learning, and a more deliberate strategy to engage with implementing partners.

**Informal mechanisms, such as input from stakeholders, are also valuable.** NORHED evaluated their strategy following input, especially from HEIs, highlighting how the Fund could be adapted to fit their needs as well as fulfilling strategic objectives of building capacity of institutions based in LMICs. It was set up building on two previous schemes of higher education and research (NOMA and NUFU) and learning about these has framed the programme. For example, previous schemes were felt to rely too heavily on ‘traditional’ capacity building initiatives.

NORHED aims to go beyond the level of the individual in its capacity building activities and instead targets the ‘wider research environment’. In addition, it has shown agility, through its changes to the MEL approach during phase 1 of the funding. Following the conclusion of this, Norad has taken the opportunity to reflect on the full programme before commencing NORHED II in 2021, and has changed conditions, such as the shift of the agreement partner role from Southern institutions to Norwegian institutions going forwards. Interviewees for the FIC fund distinguished between formal and informal routes for sharing learning and information exchange. Channels include the FIC delivery group, which runs the FIC programmes and is supported by one-to-one catchups with programme managers at the research councils, as well as workshops to facilitate learning across the programmes.

## 7.7 Timeliness of funding is a common challenge for UK research funds

**Two of the three UK funds (SPF and FIC) reported delays in funding, particularly in the start-up phase of the fund.** This had a knock-on impact in programme implementation and project delays. In other instances, the funds have adapted to avoid this. For example, discussions with stakeholders are now initiated earlier and ongoing engagement with Treasury is planned to facilitate operation at the initial stages of funding.

## 8. Conclusions

*The next three Chapters set out the key findings of the management review and its implications. First, we identify and reflect on the key findings identified from our analysis. Next, we set out our recommendations based on these findings. Finally, we specify implications for the next phase of our work in Stage 1b of the evaluation.*

### 8.1 Key conclusions

**In this section we reflect on the key findings and evidence emerging against our evaluation questions.** We outline these in relation to each of our Module Evaluation Questions.

**8.1.1 Strategy: How is strategic leadership addressed in GCRF and to what extent does it cascade through the Fund to provide a consistent focus on development impact to realise the Fund's aims and purpose?**

GCRF follows a decentralised model, which provides flexibility in delivery but risks a loss of consistency across the fund, evident in the varied ways that the overall strategy is linked to decision-making within each of the DPs. It is not clear whether this diversity is driven by conscious choice to the benefit of the fund's ambitions, or by pre-existing systems. The strategic oversight and subsequent coherence of the GCRF portfolio has been an area of criticism in the past. We have identified significant steps to address this. However, the management of the Fund remains one which leaves significant discretion to lower levels, and DPs in particular. GCRF still retains a largely decentralised model with Fund-level strategy offering a 'frame' against which DPs and programmes can align work that leverages their strengths. This has advantages and disadvantages. A less centralised model provides more opportunity for the Fund to be agile, and the response to Covid-19 provides an example of this. It has created a sense that the Fund is at least partly owned by the R&I community. It also has the potential to bring strategic oversight 'closer to the ground' and more embedded in an understanding of what is possible and acceptable to the R&I community.

However, the disadvantage of the decentralised model is a loss of coherence. GCRF aims are interpreted through the prisms of DPs and R&I communities and through the processes of peer review. Contributing to this loss of traction is the split of roles between BEIS and UKRI. While BEIS retains a strategic decision-making function, much of the strategic implementation and administration falls at UKRI level. Our comparators suggest that there is no easy solution to connecting operational decision making to strategic vision.

The high-level vision of GCRF strategy and aims is understood and, we found, supported through the levels of the Fund. The problem is not one of sharing a high-level vision but one of understanding how that vision should inform specific actions and operational decisions taken in order to manage the Fund. We identified this same challenge in relation to understanding and

achieving development impact, delivering equity in North–South relationships and partnerships, and managing to deliver value for money.

On these issues there are varying levels of alignment across DPs and programmes. In some cases, the aims of the Fund are more directly linked to the design of programmes (for example UKSA) while in other cases the aims are aligned with, and indeed supported by, prior existing programmes (for example, MRC).

It is not necessarily the case that one approach is better than the other; the problem is that differences do not appear to reflect a conscious choice to do what is optimal for the Fund. At a higher level, it is not clear that the current GCRF portfolio represents an ‘optimal’ mix of activities to achieve GCRF goals rather than a mix of constructive but potentially misaligned or suboptimal programmes of parallel work. More strategic oversight and Fund-level analyses would allow this to be assessed and – if required- better optimised.

To set this in context, we are reminded that there are tensions to be managed in whatever degree of strategic traction is adopted by the comparator funds analysed. For example, r4d has a broad strategic approach that provides a frame which is flexible enough to adapt to changes in context. Similarly, SPF sets out a core set of requirements for the Fund but allows DPs to address these in a range of ways at their discretion. However, we do see more top-down models in operation, such as the UKRI fund FIC, which suggests that bottom-up initiatives can be structured within a shared strategic vision.

The Challenge Leaders were intended to strengthen coherence between R&I expertise and strategic consistency within a portfolio. Perspectives on Challenge Leaders expressed were broadly positive, though some note that their effectiveness has been mixed. It seems that the mechanisms through which they work to deliver coherence and strategic oversight are relatively flexible and rely on personal networks. The portfolios of work in which the Challenge Leaders are involved are informally rather than formally structured. These informal mechanisms are perceived to be delivering benefits, but these are hard to capture or assess outside of a formal structure.

We also identify several barriers to Challenge Leaders – or other functions or approaches – delivering strategic oversight and coherence within the portfolio. One of these is lack of knowledge transfer between different parts of the Fund – exacerbated by a lack of consistent data and information across the portfolio. Different DPs may have limited knowledge of the work of other parts of the Fund, and there is no one dataset that provides consistent and comprehensive information on the Fund to enable analysis and strategic decision making. This is explored further below.

Linked to this, we see some evidence of ‘silos’ in the portfolio, with good networks within UKRI and between the Academies, but more limited or less effective connections across these two groups of delivery partners or with others such as UKSA – although there are some (limited) examples where collaboration cuts across these boundaries. This is linked to the strategic decentralisation of some aspects of Fund management (including the Challenge Leaders) to UKRI as described above. Although offering potential benefits, decentralisation may risk

encouraging perceptions of a UKRI-centric approach, given the proportion of funds allocated to UKRI (approximately two-thirds) and the limited links between UKRI and non-UKRI DPs. Structural factors and processes play a role in this – for example, collective funds were provided as separate funding pots to UKRI and the Academies, limiting opportunities for collaboration between them.

Limited Southern engagement in strategy development is also an area for continued improvement. There are examples where Southern perspectives are included in strategic decision making regarding programme design and funding allocation. However, there is scope to expand this given some of the challenges we see in relation to process as set out below, where wider, LMIC-rooted perspectives on Fund-level strategy could add value. We recognise, as discussed further below, that there is a growth of Southern involvement in funding processes. Expanding and deepening that engagement to inform strategic thinking within the Fund would be a natural and beneficial next step.

### 8.1.2 Processes: How do processes work and how do these support the delivery of ODA excellence in line with aims and strategy?

GCRF processes at DP and programme levels build strongly on existing funding mechanisms to allocate resources to awards. These are well-established, and typically well adapted to delivering excellent R&I. However, it is less clear whether these mechanisms are effective to deliver ODA excellence. One avenue taken to address this by many DPs and programmes is the involvement of Southern voices in funding processes, which is now commonplace across much of the Fund. This can be at different levels, from peer reviewers informing decision-making panels, to participation in those panels, and to partnership co-working on programme implementation with counterpart organisations in the Global South. There is a need to build on this progress to ensure the engagement is more meaningful and closer to decisions – and extends beyond process to considerations of strategy.

This is particularly pertinent given the observation that funding appears to be concentrated in more established research institutions and countries rather than lower-income countries. This in part reflects an overreliance on existing networks – which may seem efficient in the short term but may not be when the development outcomes are taken into account. This speaks to a need to a better understanding of VfM and efficiency trade-offs, as explored further below.

Another factor contributing to unbalanced networks is the tension between research excellence and distributional fairness of funding to support lower-income countries. This speaks to a need for better incorporation of development outcomes alongside research excellence in decision-making processes; and increased Southern participation in those decision-making processes provides an opportunity to deliver this credibly, if that knowledge is leveraged effectively.

Comparators provide examples of how this can be done at the Fund level. For example, IDRC use the RQ+ framework not just in ex post evaluation but also to support ex ante review of funding applications. For NORHED, clear criteria for assessment are in place, including weightings for relevance and equity of partnerships alongside quality. These examples all show how a cross-fund strategy can be taken to try to address this challenge.

Such a cross-Fund approach would be valuable within GCRF. Although DPs and programmes are aware of the risks of reinforcing existing networks and structures, and actions are being taken at this level, this is a challenge that DPs do not all necessarily feel well-equipped and resourced to address independently.

Beyond these wider considerations of fairness there are also considerations of equity of partnerships related to funding. Equitable partnerships have been an important focus of cross-Fund policy and are one area where we can see strategic vision at a Fund level translating into changes in action at a programme and DP level. However, this has also raised challenges for some DPs, particularly in relation to funding allocation.

At present, many DPs only fund UK-based PIs directly. This has equity implications. On the other hand, the learning from those DPs who have considered or engaged in direct funding to Southern institutions chimes with learning from Norad that this can be difficult in terms of the implications for financial administration and coordination. These administrative challenges led, in the case of Norad, to a switch back to in-country-only allocation of funding. This suggests that if DPs do wish to fund directly on a more frequent basis then the administrative implications of this (and resources required to support capacity building and complex administrative engagement) should be fully considered. For smaller DPs this could be a significant challenge given limited administrative resources. The FLAIR model, where partnership is with an LMIC grant-giving organisation, could be an alternative route to managing a more equitable distribution of funds.

There are also challenges around funding timelines, which are having an impact on the ability of GCRF to deliver effectively and efficiently. Reflecting on the comparator funds, we note that timeliness of funding is a common challenge for UK research funds linked to a wider reliance on government spending decisions which do not necessarily match with research cycles and may be outside of the control of the Fund itself. Other funds have tried to adapt to this through ongoing engagement with the Treasury to enable early information to be shared and allow actions to be taken early where changes in planning are needed.

### 8.1.3 Monitoring, evaluation and learning: To what extent does M&E drive learning and to what extent is information available to support effective decision making?

Considering the oversight of awards, we observe that monitoring and evaluation processes are in place across different levels, but it is not always clear how these feed into learning within or across DPs. Each DP is responsible for its own approach to MEL, and these would be in place prior to participating in the GCRF. At present, monitoring and evaluation activities are primarily intended to meet accountability requirements – which is important and necessary, given these are ODA funds – but not yet stepping beyond this to inform strategic thinking or improvement. A shared learning culture across and within DPs is not yet in place, though pockets and examples of good practice in terms of learning do exist within the Fund. Responsibility for establishing what is required to support both meeting ODA requirements and supporting cross-Fund learning is firmly with the leadership of GCRF.

One of the challenges in learning from M&E across the Fund is a lack of good quality, consistent and accessible data at Fund level. Efforts are being made to address this through the implementation of the ODART system and the development of KPIs. These most likely will be subject to some of the challenges faced so far in data collection, which largely stem from the differences in scale, capacity and legacy data collection systems across the DPs, alongside the diversity of the portfolio itself.

Better information on how M&E data is used, and more access to data for DPs to support their own work and to facilitate learning, may offer more incentive for engagement and provision of quality data, and may tip the balance to ensure the value gained from these activities exceeds their burden.

More broadly, efficiency considerations need to be taken into account. Efforts should reflect the differential level of funding between DPs to ensure the burden of MEL activities is proportionate to the value gained from them. However, this also needs to recognise the need for a certain level of accountability for funding, which may go beyond what DPs are accustomed to, because of the requirement to ensure and demonstrate ODA compliance. In this context the importance of informal learning is notable, since there is a risk that an overly formalised approach could risk crowding out the time and resources for informal learning opportunities.

Breaking down silos would also be beneficial in supporting better cross-Fund knowledge sharing and facilitating those informal learning opportunities. A further proliferation of working groups is probably not the best solution to achieve this; rather, increased cross-Fund working relationships beyond the UKRI and Academy silos could be beneficial. Future funding rounds of GCRF should make provision for – and allow the time needed to develop – cross-Fund programmes that span these divides.

### 8.1.4 Value for money: To what extent are systems in place to support and help manage the delivery of value for money?

Actors across the Fund are aware of the importance of value for money, but they do not necessarily follow a structured and aligned approach to assessing and delivering the four Es. The consequence is variable practices across the Fund, limiting cross-Fund learning and leaving no obvious route to improving VfM. This means that, though we see good examples of value for money where DPs and programmes minimise costs without compromising quality, these pockets of good practice are unevenly spread across the Fund and there are not clear routes to support sharing and learning from these examples.

As a way forward, it would be useful to clarify an overarching, Fund-wide VfM approach that is based on the four Es, while allowing for contextualised approaches to different delivery partners and projects. While some flexibility is needed reflecting the breadth of the portfolio, aligned thinking and shared vocabulary on VfM that is well-socialised across the portfolio will help to support effective conversations and learning around VfM to take place.

BEIS recognises that it has a role to play at the cross-Fund level in establishing expectations in this regard and supporting some cross-Fund activities (for example, learning about what



makes for effective and equitable partnership). In addition, taking forward RODA will support an information infrastructure crucial to both demonstrating and improving VfM.

This centralised input and direction will be needed to create and facilitate an improved focus on VfM. However, to some extent VfM is and will remain a distributed responsibility. Therefore, there is also a need for VfM to be established as a priority alongside the quality of research or impact on development. Key to making this case is the argument that VfM is not a separate aim but is embedded in successfully delivering high-quality research and supporting the SDGs. This understanding was not apparent across the Fund from our analysis. Alongside this, there may be a need for upskilling on VfM to address limited staff knowledge in some DPs on how VfM can be considered in a development context – and potentially the need for some centralised resource to provide a support function and point of contact to address challenges where they emerge.

## 9. Recommendations

*Based on our observations and analysis of GCRF Fund management, we identify six key recommendations that would support better delivery of the Fund to ensure it meets its aims.*

### 1. Establish clearer lines of responsibility:

Based on interviews and documents, it was not clear who 'owns' GCRF. BEIS is more than 'just' a funder and DPs (and especially UKRI) do more than 'just' implement. This creates a positive sense of distributed leadership and shared responsibilities but it has also led to a lack of direction over, for example, MEL, VfM and a balanced portfolio – though we now start to see action being taken on some of these issues, notably MEL and VfM. BEIS is best placed to establish greater clarity in these respects (and, indeed, is already beginning to do so). A useful step would be to map current lines of responsibility and identify any gaps, ensuring clear accountability processes are in place across different aspects of the Fund.

### 2. Increase and deepen Southern engagement in the operation of the Fund:

We see an increasing focus on including Southern perspectives in funding processes within GCRF in line with the Fund's strategy. However, the nature and extent of that engagement is mixed, with involvement in funding decisions in some cases while in others the role is limited to an advisory peer-review capacity rather than involvement in funding panels.

At a higher, strategic level, Southern involvement remains limited. Although moves to involve Southern perspectives in funding processes are a positive development, this engagement could be developed further to ensure Southern involvement is more meaningful and embedded throughout the operation of the Fund from strategy development onwards. This would help to address some of the challenges faced by DPs, who are very experienced in delivering high-quality R&I but who are trying to adapt to working in a development context and delivering development outcomes. There are examples in the Fund where this is happening, but these are patchy and need to be built upon to ensure effective Southern involvement is widespread. A useful first step would be to work closely with DPs to establish a baseline on what is already happening, so progress can be measured, and to share and learn from existing good practice.

### 3. Strengthen the emphasis on development outcomes alongside research excellence:

Existing systems used by DPs provide mechanisms to support research excellence, but this can be in tension with development needs. Given the aims of the Fund these two factors need

to be balanced. Increased involvement of Southern stakeholders in the award process provides a route to do this but systems also need to be adapted to enable assessment of development potential to be more central to decision making.

Comparator funds provide examples of how this can be achieved. For example, IDRC assessment uses the RQ+ framework to assess the quality of funding applications. The r4d programme uses equal weighting of development and excellence, with reviewers selected to cover both aspects of the assessment. NORHED draw on country embassy officials to assess development relevance, drawing on their expert knowledge of the country and relevant institutions; they have a deep understanding of risk management and ‘know on the ground what’s needed’ beyond what is presented on paper in the application.

Adoption of a more explicit, Fund-wide model to ensure a clear assessment of development outcomes of applications – with equal weighting given to ‘ODA Excellence’ as to R&I excellence<sup>72</sup> – would allow existing processes to adapt and make good use of Southern participation to achieve a more balanced mix of awards in the Fund portfolio. It is also important to note that research excellence and development excellence can and should be complimentary, and this should be emphasised within GCRF.

Alongside this, it would be beneficial to commit resources to support researcher development and learning in relation to delivery of research in a development context. GCRF funding supports R&I across the spectrum of disciplines, but the extent to which researchers from non-traditional development backgrounds will have experience of some of the challenges and considerations of conducting R&I activities in a development context may be understandably limited. At present, support to researchers to develop these skill sets is limited. In some cases, there are examples of QR funding playing a role in this type of skills development through the Funding Council allocations. However, a more systematic allocation of a proportion of funding to support researchers to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to work effectively and sensitively in a development context and deliver ODA excellence could offer significant benefits in terms of both process and outcomes.

## 4. Improve data systems to enable strategic analysis and improvement:

Responsibility for establishing the monitoring, evaluation and data management priorities and expectations lies with BEIS and not the DPs. The development of RODA recognises this and is an important opportunity to overhaul a patchy and difficult-to-navigate data architecture around the Fund. This opportunity should be taken to develop a ‘one-stop shop’ for information on GCRF accessible across and outside the Fund. This should provide users – from DPs and

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<sup>72</sup> Most research funders assess applications for funding on a range of criteria that may cover considerations such as the quality and novelty of the work proposed, the track record and experience of the team, and the feasibility of delivering the work. These all speak to the likely quality of the work conducted – or the ‘R&I excellence’. However, in the context of GCRF we are also interested in the extent to which work funded is able to deliver benefits for those in developing countries. This is comparable to the assessment of aspects such as ‘relevance’ or ‘potential for impact’ which are used in wider R&I programmes to capture the potential of research to deliver wider benefits to society (not necessarily in a development context).

programmes, and ideally from the wider R&I community – with the ability to conduct analyses of the portfolio, find similar research, and see what others are doing via an easily access and user-friendly interface.

Work is needed to ensure DPs buy in to the data requirements in relation to this and to make sure that the data collated adds value for them. If data has a clear purpose and can support learning, coherence and communication, this is likely to improve willingness to provide data and data quality, creating a virtuous cycle of data provision, analysis and learning. This also needs to extend beyond DPs to award holders to ensure they understand terminology and are able and willing to contribute effectively. Communication of the value, purpose and approach will be key to effective implementation.

Beyond providing a centralised database of information on the Fund, consideration should also be given to where other M&E requirements and data collection can be streamlined. M&E requirements could be tailored to the diversity and differential resourcing of different aspects of the portfolio. SPF and FIC provide some models within UKRI that could be drawn upon for this. In both cases, reporting cascades down from the Fund level through DPs, programmes and awards, but is modified depending on resourcing to ensure it is proportionate and retains some flexibility to be applied effectively at different levels of the Fund.

## 5. Build closer working relationships between DPs to facilitate learning and increase coherence within the portfolio:

Despite efforts to improve coherence and coordination across GCRF, we note that many DPs still have limited knowledge of wider work within the Fund beyond their close collaborators. We also see limited cross-Fund learning and sharing of good practice. Improved data systems are one approach that can help sharing of knowledge. Alongside this, to facilitate learning there is a need to break down silos between different groups of DPs so that knowledge sharing can occur effectively. This is a shared responsibility of both the DPs and GCRF.

Analysis of the Fund to date indicates that this communication is best facilitated by collaborative working, and that separate funds for cross-DP programmes for the UKRI DPs and the Academies may have limited those opportunities for collaboration. The next tranche of GCRF funding allocated should explicitly include funding for cross-DP collaboration that cuts across boundaries and enables a closer integration of different parts of the Fund. However, the previous round of funding has already attempted to do this and though there are some examples of cross-DP working beyond the usual relationships, these are limited in number. This should continue to be encouraged further, though there are challenges – for example, the difference in scale between DPs. Alongside this, efforts should continue to promote greater alignment of the Fund with global challenges, which has been an important strategic focus over the last few years. More responsive data systems would provide more opportunity to review and refine this strategy on an ongoing basis and ‘course correct’ where needed. Comparator funds highlight that collaboration between different actors helps to foster relationships and communities in the UK and beyond – for example, between government developments involved as delivery partners in CSSF, or with overseas partner councils such as seen in FIC.

## 6. Define, socialise and resource an approach to VfM across the portfolio, establishing why it matters and how it can be effectively implemented:

VfM is included (albeit unevenly) across GCRF and there is a willingness to engage with it alongside a recognition of its importance. An overarching VfM approach at the Fund level is in development, which will be an important step. We suggest this should be based on the four Es and should still allow for contextualised approaches for different DPs and projects. Once clarified, we recommend socialising this across the portfolio (i.e. ensuring a common vocabulary and framework is understood and applied). Doing so involves demonstrating what this means for the work that people do within the Fund, and also establishing that VfM is a priority alongside the quality of research or the impact on development. Key to making this case is the argument that VfM is not a separate aim but is embedded in successfully delivering high-quality research and supporting the SDGs. Having an established VfM approach would ideally be combined with making available a point of contact, perhaps at UKRI or BEIS, that fund implementers could consult with regarding VfM issues. Capacity building may also be needed, and funds should be earmarked to support training and dissemination of information on what VfM means in the context of development R&I and for GCRF specifically – at both the researcher level and the DP level. Some constraints are beyond the control of the Fund (annual budgeting, for example) and responsibility for developing a value for money approach (especially in relation to ODA) is widely distributed (and previously was a concern for DFID, and is currently under review by BEIS for the Newton Fund, and by DHSC for the Fleming Fund, among others). Drawing on this extensive, wider and continuing work, GCRF in partnership with UKRI (with more ODA specialist knowledge) can establish and mobilise a clear framework for managing and measuring value for money. In particular, there are examples of good practice in grant management processes (such as identifying priorities, clear terms of reference, effective evaluation) that could helpfully be applied to GCRF processes.

# 10. Implications for Stage 1b of the evaluation

The management review module provides a starting point and key lines of inquiry for the process evaluations to be conducted in stage 1b. In particular, we will explore key issues uncovered here in depth for the signature investments, including:

- ODA excellence and ensuring research excellence is always combined with development outcomes and wider considerations of equity.
- Coherence and communications across the portfolio and avoiding silos.
- M&E to support learning and ensuring adequate data infrastructure to support agile strategic decision making and analysis.
- Involvement of Southern perspectives in strategy and decision making.

The management review also gives us a more detailed insight into existing operations and challenges at an individual DP level that provides an underpinning for more detailed analysis at the signature fund level, and this will serve as a useful starting point to establish key issues of focus for the process evaluation. Furthermore, these emerging issues will serve as key starting points for the design of the Fund-wide survey to be conducted as part of the process evaluation, and we will look to investigate the issues identified here in more depth with award holders through that survey.

Beyond the process evaluations, the work of the Management review module also acts as an initial assessment of value for money. In parallel to conducting an initial review of VfM in GCRF, part of the work of the module has been to consider and develop an approach for assessing VfM in more depth through the remainder of the evaluation. Therefore, we set out in more detail our reflection on next steps in the assessment of VfM for stage 1b onwards.

## 10.1 Implications for future Value for Money assessment modules

In the light of our findings and following discussions with BEIS regarding improving VfM assessment in GCRF, we briefly identify here some parameters for how we will consider VfM in future modules.

BEIS has been consulting with partners and is in the process of developing a framework that seeks to address the challenges outlined in section 3.4.1. This is a response to (among other things) ICAI's 2017 recommendation that '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'. Part of the proposed way forward is to adopt a framework involving, firstly, continuing to devolve pre-

award assessment of VfM to delivery partners; and, secondly, peer-reviewing a sample of projects by using a rubric-based approach.

A rubrics-based approach to Value for Money (VfM) has always been seen as a well-founded approach to assessing the VfM of GCRF. A similar approach has been developed for the evaluation of the Newton Fund, and the GCRF rubric will build on this. The GCRF process builds on available evidence of change in knowledge, partnerships, practice and policy in a transparent fashion, and has the added value that it can help socialise and spread understanding of the pathways to impact, and so contribute to, improved future programme performance. The GCRF VfM approach is designed to be aligned with the work of other modules and has been staged to progress in tandem with these modules. In particular, it is designed to assess value created by GCRF at three levels – the direct benefits delivered through research and relationships, the more indirect benefits of capacity building and Hubs, and changes to the global research system in ways that benefit research that will support achieving global challenges. In this way the GCRF rubrics will aim to consider VfM at the level of the programme as a whole and make recommendations for how it could be improved.

The framework would be supported by ODART, which aims to replace the previous systems for reporting. The earlier systems were recognised as being inadequate and ODART (developed for both the Newton Fund and GCRF) is intended to overcome these limitations. According to UKRI this ‘aims to replace the tracker and achieve a major simplification in ODA reporting and business intelligence, both for users and suppliers of ODA management information.’<sup>73</sup>

This framework would avoid a narrow cost-benefit approach and is also intended to ensure any well-considered, innovative, but ultimately unsuccessful research would not be ‘punished’. Furthermore, we see merit in an approach that would help to share a conceptualisation of VfM across GCRF while also helping to connect these concepts to the practical choices that must be made when delivering a project or programme.

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<sup>73</sup> UKRI’s response to ICAI’s June 2019 review of the Newton Fund. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/2175/html/> (Accessed 8 December 2020).

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# Annex A

## Interview protocols

Please see separate annex file.

# Annex B

## Methods note

Please see separate annex

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