Final Report

Global Challenges Research Fund Evaluation

Module: Research Fairness

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Acronyms and abbreviations

AAS	African Academy of Sciences
AHRC	Arts and Humanities Research Council
APHRC	African Population and Health Research Council
ARUA	African Research Universities Alliance
BEIS	Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
Co-I	Co-Investigator
DFID	Department for International Development
DP	Delivery Partner
EQ	Evaluation Question
ESPA	Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FCO	Foreign & Commonwealth Office
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
FLAIR	Future Leaders – Africa Independent Research
GCRF	Global Challenges Research Fund
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulations
GESIP	Gender Equality, Social Inclusion and Poverty
GtR	Gateway to Research
ICAI	Independent Commission for Aid Impact
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IP	Implementing Partner
KFPE	Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries
KII	Key Informant Interview
LMICs	Low and Middle-Income Countries
LSTM	Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine
MEQ	Main Evaluation Question
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD/DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development/ Development Assistance Committee
PI	Principal Investigator
R&I	Research and Innovation

R4D	Research for Development
RC	Research Council
RFI	Research Fairness Initiative
RRC	Rethinking Research Collaborative
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
STI	Science, Technology and Innovation
TGI	The George Institute for Global Health IndiaUK United Kingdom
UKCDR	UK Campaign for Digital Rights
UKRI	UK Research & Innovation
UKSA	United Kingdom Space Agency
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive summary

The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) Research Fairness Review aims to assess the extent to which GCRF is treating partners, stakeholders and communities in the global South fairly, and contributing to the emergence of equitable and sustainable collaborations.

GCRF is a £1.5 billion fund announced by the United Kingdom (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).

The purpose of GCRF's evaluation is to assess the extent to which GCRF has contributed to its objectives and impact. The evaluation will be conducted over five years and across three stages. The first, Stage 1a, consists of four modules 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 stages position the Fund to deliver on its intended aims and commitments.

This report sets out the findings of one of those four modules – the Research Fairness review. This aims to assess the extent to which GCRF is treating partners, stakeholders and communities in the global South fairly, and contributing to the emergence of equitable and sustainable collaborations. For the purposes of this report, we define 'equity' in partnerships as referring specifically to the relations between partners, while we see 'fairness' as a broader concept encompassing other dimensions such as who has the opportunity to become a research partner in the first place, and how this particular research partnership, together with others, impacts on the context where it takes place.

Our approach assesses fairness in GCRF in relation to: strategy, vision and decision making; the commissioning process; programme-level partnership with key institutions in the global South; award-level partnerships; and broader stakeholder engagement. We also consider the way in which GCRF as a whole interacts with research ecosystems in the global South ('contextual fairness') as a cross-cutting lens. Our primary methods included portfolio-wide analysis of data available in Gateway to Research, desk reviews of available documentation, and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. We interviewed a total of 113 principal investigators and co-investigators (PIs and Co-Is) from 48 projects at the award level, of which 22 projects were part of the cross-module sample and the remaining 26 projects were in the Fairness-specific sample.

The key findings, in line with the evaluation questions considered in this module, are as follows.

To what extent have considerations of fairness been reflected in GCRF strategy, agenda-setting, vision of impact and decision-making structures?

Equitable and fair partnerships are widely seen as a key foundation of GCRF, and among BEIS and the DPs there is widespread recognition of the need for meaningful and fair engagement of Southern partners. GCRF as a whole has undergone a significant learning curve since the

start of the Fund, and UK Research & Innovation (UKRI) has taken a lead role in the effort to increase the fairness, equity and representativeness of GCRF partnerships, delivering a number of initiatives that were consistently mentioned by DPs as milestones in this process. However, the awareness of – and approach to – fairness issues across DPs remains uneven.

While there have been some attempts to strengthen Southern voices and perspectives to inform GCRF governance and decision making, progress in this respect remains limited, and is mostly confined to the commissioning process. Questions of contextual fairness are also acknowledged by DP stakeholders, particularly the risks of privileging a limited number of well-established institutions in the global South and the potential tensions between rewarding research excellence and strengthening research capacities. However, these issues do not appear to be systematically addressed at the strategic level.

To what extent have considerations related to fairness of partnerships and engagement informed GCRF funding decisions?

Equitable partnerships in relation to the funding process is one of the areas where fairness issues have advanced most significantly across GCRF. The focus on equitable partnerships in GCRF calls is stronger now compared to the early days of the Fund, but there is significant variance between DPs. There is limited evidence of Southern perspectives being incorporated in the 'upstream' prioritisation of areas for GCRF funding and design of funding calls as a whole. However, there are discrete examples of good practice, for example the Applied Global Health Research Board established by the Medical Research Council. Involvement of Southern representation and perspectives in the selection process has, however, increased significantly since the start of GCRF, with most DPs now incorporating Southern perspectives in the review and selection of awards (e.g. having Southern peer reviewers and assessors), but the way in which this happens is not consistent across the Fund.

A good degree of consideration is now given to fairness issues in the selection process – in the form of clearer language in funding call documentation, more explicit requirements, and clearer guidance given to peer reviewers and assessment panels – although the emphasis and level of detail again varies widely across DPs and calls. A number of GCRF funding calls have been opened to Southern lead applicants, which is an important step since limiting applicants to UK PIs was widely acknowledged as a key obstacle to fairness and equity in GCRF. Similarly, a number of funding calls have been launched with a specific focus on partnership development which should (over time) help to create the time and space necessary for partners to build more equitable relationships.

How effectively have issues related to fairness been addressed in programme-level partnerships between DPs and regional institutions in the global South?

The establishment of strategic partnerships between GCRF DPs and institutions in the global South represents a key aspect of GCRF commitment to strengthening equitable partnerships and Southern involvement, as demonstrated by our analysis of two prominent examples of such partnerships: the partnership between UKRI and the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) and the partnership between the Royal Society and the African Academy of Sciences (AAS) for Future Leaders – Africa Independent Research (FLAIR).

Both of the programme-level partnerships reviewed appear to have worked well, with Northern and Southern lead partners expressing satisfaction with the collaboration. The creation of these programme-level partnerships is acknowledged as a significant step forward in GCRF thinking about Southern engagement, and there are indications that this type of equitable engagement with well-established, well-respected pan-African institutions could potentially play a bridging role to bring a broader variety of institutions (in terms of size and type) into the GCRF sphere, that is, with 'stronger' universities building the capacity of 'weaker' ones' through a hub-and-spoke model. However, this is not a given, particularly if

fundamental issues (such as finding the right balance between research excellence and capacity building) are not addressed. The way in which these tensions are navigated inevitably affects who is included in – and, by implication, excluded from – GCRF-funded opportunities and networks. These issues are fundamental to the GCRF model and must be reflected upon and revisited at regular intervals to ensure that the maximum value is added to research ecosystems at the local, national and continental levels.

What do GCRF award-level partnerships look like in practice and how fair are the partnerships in relation to opportunities, process and sharing of benefits?

There is great diversity in award-level partnerships, in terms of numbers and roles of Southern researchers involved, as well as the attention given to equity and fairness in partnerships. The distribution of partnerships shows both 'depth' (a small number of countries and institutions with a high number of GCRF award partnerships) and 'spread' (a large number of countries and institutions with low-level GCRF engagement). Most partnerships emerge out of previous collaborations and personal connections. Compressed timelines in the proposal writing and design stages significantly curtail the possibility to establish new partnerships and the role that Southern partners play in research design.

Awards in our sample generally appear to have given consideration to fairness. While available evidence is not sufficiently robust to make strong quantitative claims, qualitative analysis shows that many GCRF awards are based on well-functioning and mutually beneficial collaborations. The Interdisciplinary Hubs stand out as examples of good practice in this regard. Administrative and financial requirements are widely perceived as presenting significant challenges to fair process, including the need to accept payment in arrears in most cases, which constitutes a real burden for Southern partners. UK due diligence requirements were also challenging and often had a knock-on effect in terms of project delays.

How fair have GCRF projects been when engaging with stakeholders (beyond formal partners) and, in particular, local communities?

GCRF awards report extensive engagement with stakeholders other than formal partners, although the distinction between 'formal' and 'informal' partners can at times be blurred. The most common stakeholders involved were local and national governments, national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local communities – and, less frequently, the private sector. This diversity, combined with the limitations of time and resources of the evaluation, has not allowed for an in-depth analysis of fairness issues for this wider group; nonetheless, a few observations emerge from our qualitative analysis.

Awards varied in terms of the breadth and depth of stakeholder engagement, ranging from minimal engagement to incorporation into each phase of the project. Pre-existing connections and networks were crucial to stakeholder engagement and were relied upon for participation and buy-in, and the role of in-country formal partners was central to stakeholder engagement. Southern partners typically used their own existing networks, which created a level of trust that may not have been afforded to the Northern partner(s) alone. In addition, the risk of raising expectations in local communities about immediate benefits from the research process, without those actually materialising, emerges as a key fairness issue.

Our analysis suggests that little thinking has been done within GCRF on what 'fairness' means when engaging with non-formal partners. This includes the risk of research projects 'doing harm' by, for example, displacing local priorities or placing undue burden in terms of time commitments on national or local stakeholders, or creating unrealistic expectations for immediate benefits in local communities. While awareness of these tensions may exist at the level of individual research teams in some instances, they do not appear to be systematically escalated at the strategic level.

The overarching recommendation emerging from the Fairness review is for GCRF to keep a focus on 'fairness writ large'. While promoting equitable partnerships is essential and should remain a priority, it is important that other dimensions of fairness are not overlooked: GCRF as a whole carries a great potential to positively influence research ecosystems in the global South but, by the same token, also an inherent risk of 'doing harm' – a risk that persists even if most of its funded partnerships meet standards of equity and fairness.

The following more specific recommendations are made based on this review:

1. **Strengthen Southern voices and perspectives to inform GCRF governance and decision making.** Increasing the level and the diversity of Southern involvement at the strategic level should be prioritised to deepen and broaden the conversation on fairness issues to maximise impact for the GCRF investment as a whole. This matters centrally – that is, through increased representation on the GCRF Strategic Advisory Group – and at the devolved DP level, where a minimum amount of representation could be mandated to ensure that Southern perspectives shape investment priorities.

2. **Improve consistency across DPs and create minimum standards for 'fairness writ large' across the GCRF portfolio.** An important dimension of this is the need to explicitly recognise the tensions that emerge in the commissioning process between, on the one hand, 'research excellence' as conventionally measured in academia and, on the other hand, 'capacity building' and engagement of less-established institutions. This is a fundamental conceptual tension in GCRF, which defies purely technical solutions.

3. **Address a number of well-recognised obstacles to the engagement of Southern researchers and institutions in a way that is consistent across DPs.** Several issues have been brought up consistently in this review as inhibiting Southern participation, and addressing them consistently across DPs would contribute significantly to fairness across the Fund. These include: longer call timelines and the use of pre-call announcements and/or multi-stage proposal processes; a GCRF-wide review of due diligence requirements and payment terms to identify viable ways of working that minimise the burden/obstacles for Southern partners; and investment in activities and resources to enhance the capacity of UK and low and-middle-income country (LMIC)-based administrators to manage ODA grants.

4. **Provide guidance on how fairness over the lifetime of awards can be more systematically measured and reported.** Most awards are not required to report in any detail on how they have ensured fairness at the proposal stage, during delivery or upon closure. Award holders should be encouraged to document the ways in which the project promoted fairness and equity in partnerships, and the results of these approaches, i.e. the benefits that flowed from Southern partners having shaped research design and implementation.

5. **Creating GCRF-wide guidance and/or case studies to demonstrate the importance of fairness principles, showcase best practice and inspire research teams to reach for ODA excellence in relation to fairness** – to guide new applicants in future calls and improve practice among the existing grantee cohort**.** One area where guidance would be particularly useful is on the imperative to 'do no harm' with regard to stakeholder engagement – including direct concerns such as safeguarding, but also reflecting on the potential to 'do harm' indirectly, for example where local priorities are displaced by externally imposed agendas.

6. **Develop a clear framework for capacity building and plan for clearly delineating/ prioritising this type of activity.** Developing a clearer framework for capacity enhancement and plan for clearly delineating/prioritising this type of work (through criteria and scoring systems) would help to draw in a more diverse range of formal Southern partners. Importantly, this will help GCRF commissioners and applicants to negotiate possible trade-offs more effectively between research excellence, capacity enhancement and impact.

1 Introduction

The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) Research Fairness Review is part of Stage 1a of the GCRF evaluation. It assesses the extent to which GCRF is fair in its engagement with partners, stakeholders and communities in the global South, and contributing to the emergence of equitable and sustainable collaborations.

Stage 1a of the GCRF evaluation assesses GCRF's core commissioning and management functions – the activity level in the Theory of Change – via four modules that focus on (1) management, (2) relevance and targeting, (3) fairness, and (4) the integration of gender, social inclusion and poverty (GESIP) 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. The aim of Stage 1a is to 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 Research Fairness module is to assess the extent to which GCRF is treating partners, stakeholders and communities in the global South[1] fairly, and contributing to the emergence of equitable and sustainable collaborations. Along with the other three modules, the Research Fairness module contributes to addressing the Main Evaluation Question (MEQ)1 for Stage1a, i.e. 'Is the GCRF relevant, well-targeted, fair, gender-sensitive, socially inclusive and well-managed?' To this aim, the module addresses five sub-questions:

1. To what extent have considerations of fairness been reflected in GCRF strategy, agenda-setting, vision of impact, and decision-making structures?

2. To what extent have considerations related to fairness of partnerships and engagement informed GCRF funding decisions?

3. How effectively have issues related to fairness been addressed in programme-level partnerships between delivery partners (DPs) and regional institutions in the global South?

4. What do GCRF project-level partnerships look like in practice and how fair are the partnerships in relation to opportunities, process and sharing of benefits?

5. How fair have GCRF projects been when engaging with stakeholders (beyond formal partners) and, in particular, local communities?

In investigating these questions, this module provides an analysis in relation to two main aspects of the GCRF Theory of Change: firstly, the assumption that there is 'sufficient appetite and capacity in LMICs to participate in GCRF', and secondly, the outcome that 'sustainable global R&I partnerships are established across geographies and disciplines'. Through its

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[1] In this report, the term 'global South' is used to indicate countries on the OECD/DAC list of ODA-eligible countries, while 'global North' is used to indicate countries with High Income Economies (https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519#High_income). The expressions 'Northern' and 'Southern' researchers are used to refer to individuals whose primary professional affiliation is with institutions in countries of the global North and global South respectively, rather than referring to the individuals' nationality.

analysis of wider considerations of fairness in relation to GCRF, it will also look at the outcome in relation to the development of 'stakeholder networks for use and replication [...] across research, policy, practice, civil society & enterprise in partner countries, internationally & UK'.

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Box 1.Box 1 – Overview of GCRF and the evaluation

GCRF is a £1.5 billion fund announced by the United Kingdom (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 R&I funders, which lead on commissioning R&I to address development challenges. 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 such as 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 framework to provide a robust measure of the Fund's impact and value for money (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 value for money 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. It addresses the purpose through five main evaluation questions (MEQs) and a three-stage design that tracks GCRF's Theory of Change from activities to impact over five years. Each stage applies specific modules to focus on different aspects of the Theory of Change and the Fund. Stage 1a of the evaluation runs from May 2020 to February 2021. This first, Stage 1a, consists of four modules conducted in parallel that aim to understand how BEIS and GCRF's 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 GESIP in the Fund's commissioning and processes.

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As an unprecedented investment in Research for Development (R4D),[2] GCRF has brought many new UK researchers and institutions into contact with 'development issues' and with institutions and researchers in the global South. In the GCRF strategy, this expansion of the

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[2] Research for Development (R4D) is a term originated in the UK Department for International Development to indicate research funded through Official Development Assistance (ODA) and carried out with the fundamental aim of bringing about positive change benefiting people in Low and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs). See Datta, A. (2018, September 3). Doing research for (and not on) development: some important questions for the Global Challenges Research Fund. LSE Blog: Impact of Social Sciences. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2018/09/03/doing-research-for-and-not-on-development-some-important-questions-for-the-global-challenges-research-fund/

UK R&I capacity for challenge-led research is seen as a key tenet of the Fund. The strategy states that GCRF provides 'a unique opportunity to build a global community of researchers committed to sustainable development and the eradication of poverty'.[3] This opens opportunities, but also the risk of 'doing harm' – both at the level of individual research projects, and in terms of aggregate impact on the research ecosystems in the global South. This module attempts to assess such issues of **contextual fairness** as a cross-cutting lens across the five evaluation sub-questions, as discussed further in section 2.

1.1 Strategic and policy context for the GCRF research fairness review in 2020/21

In 2020, the evaluation's inception report outlined the changing strategic and policy context for GCRF,[4] changes which will accelerate in 2021. The national policy discourse on ODA has been evolving since GCRF started in 2015, and 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.[5] 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. (At the time of writing in early 2021, the Integrated Review has not yet been published.) The emerging vision is to achieve influence in an increasingly complex world by bringing together all of the UK's national assets in a coherent, fused approach.[6]

Second, the merger in August 2020 of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Department for International Development (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 ODA that will replace the UK government's 2015 aid strategy.[7] 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, concentrating 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.[8]

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 and management – and perhaps more so than any other 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 time frame and featuring a reduction in the ODA commitment from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross domestic product (GDP).[9] New legislation is planned to reconcile this decision with the 2015 International Development Act, but it is not

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[3] BEIS (2017). UK Strategy for the Global Challenges Research Fund.

[4] GCRF Evaluation (2020). Inception Report. *Itad/Rand.* Unpublished.

[5] Prime Minister's Office (2020).

[6] This may be influenced by the fusion doctrine. HM Government (2018). National Security Capability Review. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/705347/6.4391_CO_National-Security-Review_web.pdf

[7] Worley (2020).

[8] Raab, D. (2020). Letter from the Foreign Secretary to the Chair, International Development Committee.

[9] Dickson (2020).

clear how this will relate to the 2002 International Development Act, which binds UK aid to make a 'contribution to a reduction in poverty'.[10] 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 (UKRI) in 2018 brought a shift in how the nine Research Councils (RCs) 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 ID team, in collaboration with the individual 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, Covid-19 has had an impact on research institutions and especially universities, both in terms of budgets[11] 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.

This shifting context is likely to have significant impacts on GCRF's strategic role, funding and objectives during the evaluation period. **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 Fairness 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 a number of persistent weaknesses in GCRF's strategy, governance and management processes.

First, in late 2017 the Fund was the focus of a rapid review by the UK's ICAI, with a follow-up in 2019.[12] The 2017 Rapid Review made recommendations in four main areas (see Table 1). 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',[13] as progress was often led by GCRF's DPs, most notably by UKRI.

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[10] Worley (2020).

[11] Halterback *et al.* (2020).

[12] ICAI (2017).

[13] ICAI (2019).

Table 1: 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. https://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019-ICAI-Follow-up-GCRF.pdf

With regard to North–South partnerships, the ICAI review revealed a reliance on large institutions in middle-income countries as well as the lack of a structured approach to capacity development. The review found that '[t]he GCRF has been proactive in working cooperatively with Southern stakeholders. However, it could do more to recognise and respond to the needs of Southern stakeholders, and to create more equitable partnerships with Southern research institutions'.[14] Two issues were highlighted in this regard:

- Partners coming from a limited number of middle-income countries and larger institutions. The review found that this was partly due to the early rounds of GCRF funding having been done 'in haste, encouraging UK research institutions to rely on existing research partnerships, which were mainly in middle-income countries'.[15]
- Lack of a structured approach to capacity development. The review noted, in particular, that there had been 'no analysis of existing capacities or identification of geographical or thematic priorities'.[16]

The ICAI review pointed to an unresolved tension between the GCRF's focus on research excellence (which 'may continue to advantage developing countries that already have credible research institutions') and its aim of capacity building, which would instead '[direct] investments towards poorer countries where capacity building may be most needed' (ICAI, 2017:2). The review recommended clearer priorities and approach to research partnerships.

Second, in 2018 the Foundation Evaluation of GCRF was carried out. The Foundation Evaluation focused on the commissioning and grant making processes in the early stages of the Fund, which found similar challenges to ICAI.[17] Its headline conclusion was that 'the GCRF is operationally functional, and processes are for the most part transparent, well-run and clear'.[18] 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. In particular, with reference to North–South partnership the Foundation Evaluation found that collaborations did not yet match GCRF's ambition for equitable partnerships. Drawing on lessons from past R4D programmes, the evaluation report noted that the aim of achieving equitable partnerships

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[14] ICAI (2017), p.34.

[15] ICAI (2017), p.ii.

[16] ICAI (2017), p.4.

[17] GCRF Evaluation Foundation Stage report (2018).

[18] GCRF (2018), p.2.

requires changes at different levels (from application procedures to peer review and to financial management arrangements and monitoring and evaluation). The Foundation Evaluation recommended, in particular, 'a more explicit process of co-production in programme/call design between UK and global South partners/stakeholders' which 'would better reflect the intrinsic principles of the GCRF and would likely lead to more buy-in, awareness and innovation in the partner countries'.[19]

Third, in 2020 the Inception Report for this evaluation carried out a high-level portfolio review. It was found in the portfolio that middle-income countries dominate, 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.

These previous assessments made of GCRF, and the still-emerging policy and strategic context for UK aid, form the backdrop to this Research Module Review.

1.3 What is research fairness?

In recent years the question of whether research is 'fair' has been posed with increasing urgency – yet the exact meaning of the term remains somewhat vague.

For the purpose of this evaluation, we define research fairness as **a way of designing, conducting and evaluating research that takes into consideration the potential effects (positive and/or negative) of the research on all those involved (as partners, participants, users and beneficiaries), as well as the broader impact on the context where the research takes place**.

This definition acknowledges that a research project is never only about finding answers to a particular research question. It is also about the process itself, the interests of the various actors involved in different roles and the ways in which these interests are reflected in the research definition of research questions and methods. While this applies, to various degrees, to all research endeavours, its practical relevance is amplified within the practice of R4D, where the engagement of different stakeholders beyond researchers is considered essential to generating impact. Relatedly, the definition embeds the recognition that R4D interventions do not happen in a vacuum but are embedded in historical inequalities and existing power dynamics.

Research fairness can be thought of as having three concentric layers:

- Fairness among those who are directly involved in conducting research (research partners)
- Fairness among those who come into contact with the research process in other roles (e.g. research participants, 'knowledge brokers', research users)
- The legacy that research processes, in a cumulative way, have on the context where they take place. We refer to this layer as '**contextual fairness**'.

Below, we discuss each of these layers in more detail.

1.3.1 Equitable research partnerships

In the context of R4D, the first layer (equity among partners involved in conducting research) has received the most policy attention.

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[19] GCRF (2018), p. B64.

> **Box 2.Box 2 – Note on terminology**
>
> The terms 'fair' and 'equitable' are often used interchangeably in the policy literature on partnerships. For the purposes of this report, we define '**equity**' in partnerships as referring specifically to the relations between partners, while we see '**fairness**' as a broader concept encompassing other dimensions – such as who has the opportunity to become a research partner in the first place, how the partnership interacts with research participants and other stakeholders, and how this particular research partnership, together with others, impacts on the context where it takes place, including national research systems and research capacity. Equitable partnerships can therefore be seen as a necessary but not sufficient condition of fairness in R4D. In principle it would be conceivable to have a situation where a partnership is equitable (as both partners have equal voice, there are transparent and jointly agreed procedures, and the benefits are distributed in a mutually satisfactory manner) and yet not fair (if, for example, inherent inequalities based on access to resources and knowledge are reproduced and legitimised, or if the partners act as gatekeepers to prevent other institutions and researchers from accessing similar opportunities).

Equitable and fair research partnerships between institutions in the global North and the global South are widely regarded as critical in ODA-funded research. It is increasingly recognised that achieving fairness in partnerships goes beyond good intentions: it requires a deliberate effort and well-defined priorities, as well as significant skills, time and resources. Asymmetries of power among partners, along with operational conditions and the pressure to 'deliver' under tight timelines, often create disincentives for fairness (see the highlights from our literature review, summarised in Box 3 and discussed more extensively in Annex 1).

> **Box 3.Box 3 – Key issues in North–South research partnerships: highlights from the literature review**
>
> **Equitable and fair research partnerships between institutions in the global North and the global South are widely regarded as critical in ODA-funded R4D** – based on a range of arguments that are normative, instrumental and/or statutory in nature.
>
> **Asymmetries of power among partners, along with operational conditions and the pressure to 'deliver' under tight timelines, often create disincentives for fairness.** The typical division of labour of research collaborations sees Northern partners responsible for the design of research questions and methods as well as for presenting and publishing results. Southern researchers are often delegated to the role of data collectors or 'fixers', whose main role is to facilitate interaction with local stakeholders and communities. Funding and contractual arrangements, due diligence requirements and tight delivery deadlines can further penalise Southern partners. Appropriation of local data is an emerging concern in the reflection on North–South research partnerships.
>
> The parallel reflections, which have gained significant momentum in recent years, about **'decolonising development'** and **'decolonising the academy'** provide important context for these efforts, to ensure that wider systemic issues are kept firmly in the picture, avoiding the temptation of technical fixes. Reflecting on the assumptions underpinning many **capacity-building** efforts has emerged as a particular priority in this regard.
>
> **Covid-19 has served as a 'wake-up call' on the problematic underpinning assumptions of R4D international collaboration.** With most international travel disrupted, Southern partners have played a much larger role in many R4D collaborations – thus putting into sharp focus the limits of traditional divisions of labour, and potentially offering models and alternatives for fairer partnerships. Relatedly, the recognition that a portion of international travel in R4D collaborations is not strictly speaking 'essential' can open the door to a more open discussion about the **environmental footprint** of R4D investments.

A recognition of these challenges has led to efforts to improve the equity of research partnerships. A number of guidelines and recommendations have been developed by different organisations in an effort to infuse fairness principles into partnership design and implementation.[20]

Our conceptual framework adopts as a starting point the three domains of fairness identified in the **Research Fairness Initiative** (RFI), developed by the Council on Health Research for Development (COHRED) – namely *fairness of opportunity* (before research); *fair process* (during research); and *fair sharing of benefits* (after research). We also draw on other well-established initiatives (e.g. the work on equitable partnerships carried out by the UK Campaign for digital rights (UKCDR))[21] as well as the lessons from previous R4D programmes, for example the Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation (ESPA) programme. The ESPA equity framework for equitable partnerships has three dimensions (Recognition, Procedure and Distribution) that align well with the RFI approach (see Table 2).

Table 2: Fairness assessment framework

Stage	RFI dimension	ESPA equity dimensions	Key factors to consider in a research partnership
Before research	**Fairness of opportunity**	Recognition	Who has a say in designing, planning and implementing the research project? How are the various partner priorities, incentives and practical constraints factored into this?
During research	**Fair process**	Procedure	Are there clear and transparent procedures for accountability and for everyone to have a voice?
After research	**Fair benefit-sharing**	Distribution	Is there agreement on how the expected benefits of the partnership will be distributed?

Sources : Lavery and Ijsselmuiden (2018) ; ESPA (2018).

There is a growing recognition that many of the challenges of fair partnerships are systemic in nature, and require systemic responses. Ultimately North–South partnerships reflect global power differentials that are far beyond the influence of research teams and their institutions. While frameworks such as RFI are helpful, they carry the inherent risk of limiting responsibility for equity to partners themselves, promoting technical fixes to problems that are inherently political. At worst, research collaborations (particularly if established with elite institutions in the South) can act as a smokescreen, shifting attention away from the roles of funding systems and other structures that perpetuate global inequity in research.

1.3.2 Fairness in engagement with stakeholders

The second layer encompasses the engagement with all those other actors with whom researchers interact at various stages of the research process – ranging from informants participating in the research through interviews to process facilitators and to research users.

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[20] One example is the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE), which advocated the use of 11 principles that deal with a wide range of issues, from agenda-setting to dissemination. See Carvalho *et al.* (2018).

[21] Dodson (2017).

The rise of the impact agenda in academia has been paralleled by an emphasis on the engagement of key stakeholders (beyond formal research partners) in the design and production of knowledge. In its most accomplished form, this engagement is known as co-production. While a strong case is made in R4D for engaging non-academic actors throughout the research process, it is also increasingly clear that fairness is not a guarantee in these collaborations. A number of key issues are explored in the literature – as summarised in Box 4 and explored in the literature review (Annex 1).

> **Box 4.Box 4 – Key issues in stakeholders' engagement: highlights from the literature review**
>
> Researchers often do not have sufficient time and resources to meaningfully engage non-academic stakeholders, which may lead to 'tick-box' rather than meaningful engagement.
>
> Engagement with academics can divert local time and resources from more relevant and/or pressing priorities. There is a risk of 'engagement saturation' by which key stakeholders have a disproportionate amount of their time and resources dedicated to externally set research agendas.
>
> Research findings can be politically divisive. There may be a trade-off between research that is innovative and transformative, but may contradict intrenched interests, and research that can be more easily co-produced and used, but may focus on 'low-hanging fruit' and make little difference to address development challenges.
>
> 'Whom to engage with' is a fundamental political question. Because involving 'everyone' is impossible, choices should be made and, in so doing, researchers inevitably end up either reinforcing or challenging existing power dynamics. For this reason, applying a political economy lens to stakeholder mapping is crucial.

R4D research teams often engage with local communities in the global South in different ways. This engagement can potentially be transformative but also amplifies the issues outlined above, given the inherent power differential between the parts. The moral, ethical and social implications arising from such engagement are substantial (see Box 5 and Annex 1).

> **Box 5.Box 5 – Key issues in engagement with local communities: highlights from the literature review**
>
> **The time necessary for establishing relationship of mutual trust with local communities does not fit well with the compressed timeline of most research projects**. For example, feeding results back to communities is an essential – but often overlooked and/or under-resourced – condition for fair engagement.
>
> **It is often unclear 'what's in it' for the communities.** Given the nature of R4D research, in many cases communities are not likely to experience benefits of projects in which they participate in the short term, and not at a scale that they might attribute to the project. Community members may participate in research expecting rewards or benefits that do not eventually materialise.
>
> **Community involvement does not lend itself to standardised procedures or ethical reviews.** It blurs boundaries around intellectual property and calls for careful consideration of how various contributions should be acknowledged, attributed and rewarded. Ethical procedures focusing on informed consent often bypass larger ethical issues.
>
> **Researchers often fail to recognise the diversity and power dynamics within communities.** Communities are not monoliths, and issues of inclusion and exclusion should be given careful consideration. There are risks of elite capture of the research process.

1.3.3 Contextual fairness

A focus on contextual fairness moves the attention to the aggregate impact of R4D investments on research ecosystems and power dynamics in the global South. This is underpinned by the acknowledgement that, even if individual projects are fair in their partnerships and engagement with stakeholders, they can still, taken together, have unfair results. In particular:

- Research partnerships can exacerbate inequalities among countries and institutions in the global South. Generic labels of 'global North' and 'global South' do not capture the complexity of hierarchies among and within countries in the global South.[22] The search for 'tried and true' Southern partners by Northern academics may lead to disproportionate support and funding going to a small proportion of often elite organisations and scholars in a few countries in the global South.

- Research partnerships can lead to deviation of Southern-generated research from locally, nationally and regionally relevant priorities. It has been noted in particular that the emphasis on 'global challenges' can potentially squeeze out local agendas that do not neatly fit into these definitions; and narrow definitions of impact can promote short-termism and 14isincentivize Southern academics from pursuing long-term theoretical research.[23] This can be amplified by the enrolment of Southern research into competitive Northern research systems and the scientometrics which substantiates them.[24]

- More broadly, the significant increase in UK academics engaged in development research, and the related need to achieve and demonstrate research uptake and development impact, raise potential risks in terms of 'engagement saturation' of national and local stakeholders, which may be diverted from more relevant priorities.

- Impact on the environment is an integral dimension of contextual fairness. For example, the benefits coming from international travel as part of R4D partnerships should be weighed against the carbon footprint that such travel produces.[25]

1.4 Structure of the report

The report is structured as follows. Section 2 sets the context for our analysis by outlining the current state of play in terms of reflections on fairness in global partnerships and engagement, outlining the framework of analysis that will be used in the evaluation, and briefly describing the methodology used (with a more in-depth explanation of the methodology included in Annex 2). Section 3 reports our findings for each of the evaluation sub-questions (sub-EQs), with contextual fairness as a cross-cutting lens across those. Section 4 concludes the report by summarising our conclusions and implications for the next phase of the evaluation.

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[22] Narayanan (2019).

[23] Istratii & Lewis (2019).

[24] Ciarli & Ràfols (2019).

[25] Holden *et al.* (2017).

2   Approach and methodology

Our approach draws on existing reflections on the challenges of achieving fairness and equity in global research programmes. We look at research in GCRF at various levels: strategy, vision and decision making (sub-EQ1); commissioning process (sub-EQ2); programme-level partnership with key institutions in the global South (sub-EQ3); and award-level partnerships (sub-EQ4) and broader stakeholders' engagement (sub-EQ5). As a cross-cutting lens, we highlight the importance of looking at the way in which GCRF as a whole interacts with research ecosystems in the global South ('contextual fairness').

This section highlights our analytical approach, research questions and methods, as well as the strengths and limitations of our analysis.

2.1   Overview of approach

The assessment of research fairness in GCRF builds on the review of the current policy context, emerging learning and open debates discussed above in section 1.3. A number of considerations shape our approach:

- **GCRF is an extremely complex investment, with multiple levels of management and DPs.** As highlighted in the Management review, such complexity – with over 30 'transition points' where funding moves from one resource holder to another – poses challenges in ensuring a consistent strategic focus (see Figure 1). Such complexity also makes transferability of lessons from previous R4D programmes more difficult. The Fairness review explores how consideration of fairness have played out at different levels, the degree to which strategic priorities have cascaded to award-level implementation, and – conversely – whether there is evidence of award-level learning on fair partnerships and engagement being escalated to Fund-wide strategy and decision-making structures.

Figure 1: Figure 1: GCRF structure and allocation of funds

Overall structure and allocation of funds
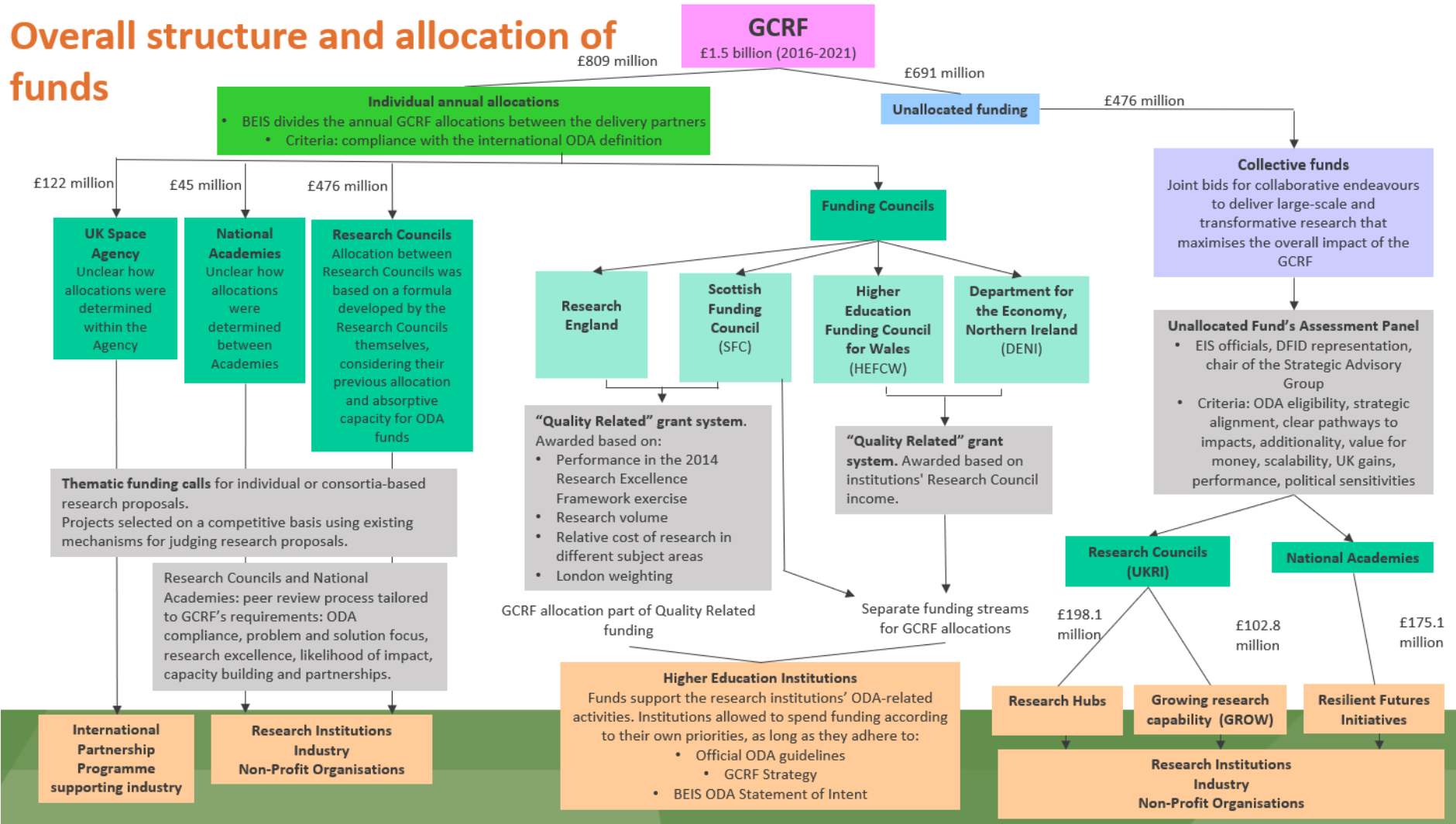
- There is no shared understanding among funders, institutions and researchers in terms of what exactly it means for research to be 'fair' and how fairness can be achieved in practice. Most learning to date has focused on the issue of equitable partnerships; however, it is increasingly clear that other dimensions – such as the interaction with research participants and research users, as well as the impact of research processes on the context in which they take place – are equally deserving of consideration.

- As an R4D investment of unprecedented magnitude, GCRF will play an important role in shaping the meaning, requirements and standards of research fairness in ODA-funded R4D investments. Yet for the same reasons, GCRF *as a whole* is potentially at risk of having a negative impact on the global South research ecosystem, a risk that subsists even if most individual partnerships achieve fairness. The impact that GCRF as a whole will have on research ecosystems in the global South is not merely a function on how 'fair' its individual partnership are, but also depends on broader questions around who sets the priorities for research, whose knowledge is empowered, who can have a voice in international networks and collaborations, and what are the systems, processes and values that determine inclusion (and, inevitably, exclusions) from funding opportunities.

> *There is a risk that, despite best intentions, the GCRF might […] reproduce inequalities rather than solve them, while at the same time dehumanising communities and promoting an academic 'white saviour' culture in which money, leadership and 'answers' flows from one nation outwards to other nations in need of being saved, fixed, helped or developed. (Research Community Guide to the GCRF – Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) workshop report)*

The above reflections have two key implications for our analytical framework. First, throughout our analysis **we use the term 'fairness' as encompassing the three dimensions of the RFI framework**. This helps to avoid a disproportionate emphasis on the process dimension, which tends to be the most immediately evident. Fair collaborations are not only about what happens *during* any one research project – rather, they encompass how that particular research project came about and what happens after its conclusions.

Second, as described in section 1.3, **we look at three layers of fairness in GCRF: fairness towards partners, fairness towards other stakeholders** (e.g. research participants, research users) and **fairness in engagement with context** ('contextual fairness'). The interaction between these dimensions and layers is illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: Dimensions and layers of fairness

	Fairness of opportunities	Fairness of process	Fairness of benefits
Fairness among research partners ('equitable partnerships')	Who has a say in designing, planning and implementing the research project? How are the various partners' priorities, incentives and practical constraints factored into this?	Are there clear and transparent procedures for accountability and for everyone to have a voice?	Is there agreement on how the expected benefits of the partnership will be distributed?

Fairness towards stakeholders (research participants, users, beneficiaries)	How are the interests and constraints of research participants and other stakeholders considered when designing a research project?	Do research participants and other stakeholders involved in the process have the possibility of helping shape the process in a way that works for them? Are there systems/processes they can use if it doesn't?	Are research participants and other stakeholders satisfied with 'what's in it for them' from the research? Are there mechanisms to gather feedback?
Contextual fairness (aggregate impact)	Who has a voice in identify research priorities and shaping funding opportunities? Are GCRF investments promoting greater opportunities for fair participation in research in the global South?	Are GCRF investments promoting better practice in conducting research through fair processes?	Are GCRF investments having a positive impact in the global South? Are they contributing to redressing contextual inequalities?

2.2 Research questions

Within EQ1 ('Is the GCRF relevant, well-targeted, fair, gender-sensitive, socially inclusive and well-managed?'), the Fairness review addresses five sub-EQs, each looking at a different dimension of fairness in GCRF (see Table 4). 'Contextual fairness' is applied as a cross-cutting lens to each of them.

Table 4: Module EQs, level, lines of enquiry and methods

Module EQs	Level in GCRF and lines of enquiry	Main methods used
Sub-EQ1 **To what extent have considerations of fairness been reflected in GCRF strategy, agenda-setting, vision of impact, and decision-making structures?**	Level: BEIS and DPs Lines of enquiry: ■ How have considerations related to fairness among research partners (equitable partnerships) been considered at the strategic level? ■ To what extent has fairness been considered in relation to other stakeholders engaged or affected by the research process? ■ Has the strategic thinking underpinning GCRF considered its aggregate impact on research ecosystems in the global South, and the effect of its investments on existing power dynamics?	Document review KIIs
Sub-EQ2 **To what extent have considerations related to fairness of partnerships and engagement informed GCRF funding decisions?**	Level: Programme and calls Lines of enquiry: ■ Do funding calls mandate/encourage North–South research partnerships? ■ Do funding calls mandate/encourage engagement with non-academic stakeholders? ■ Are considerations of equity and fairness included in funding calls? ■ Can Southern institutions apply as lead institutions?	Document review
Sub-EQ3 **How effectively have issues related to fairness been addressed in programme-level partnerships between DPs and regional institutions in the global South?**	Level: Partnerships between DPs and regional institutions in the global South, and specifically: ■ Partnership between UKRI and the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA), focused on support for the ARUA Centres of Excellence; ■ Partnership between the Royal Society and AAS, focused on the delivery of the FLAIR fellowship programme. Lines of enquiry: ■ How have considerations of fairness been incorporated in the relations between DPs and their regional partners? ■ How are the resulting programmes promoting fairness in GCRF engagement with the global South?	Document review KIIs
Sub-EQ4 **What do GCRF award-level partnerships look like in practice and how fair are the partnerships in relation to opportunities, process and sharing of benefits?**	Level: GCRF Awards. The sample analysis (48 awards across DPs) had the following lines of enquiry: ■ How have issues of fairness emerged, and been addressed, in award-level partnerships, and in particular: ■ *Fairness of opportunities*: How did the partnership come about? How did different partners contribute to research design? What weight was given to partnership-building before the start of research? ■ *Fairness of process:* To what extent were formal mechanisms and systems put in place to address fairness-related issues in the research process? What fairness-related challenges emerged in the research process?	Document review KIIs Topic modelling

	▪ *Fairness of benefits*: How did different partners envisage benefits from research? Where applicable, to what extent have these benefits been realised? This was supplemented with insights from the topic modelling analysis conducted by Digital Science, looking at the UKRI portfolio (1135 awards) based on information available on the portal Gateway to Research. This analysis had the following lines of enquiry: ▪ What is the geographical distribution of partnerships in UKRI GCRF awards? ▪ To what extent are fairness-related words mentioned in UKRI GCRF project documentation? ▪ To what extent have publications resulting from UKRI GCRF awards been co-authored by Northern and Southern researchers?	
Sub-EQ5 **How fair have GCRF projects been when engaging with stakeholders (beyond formal partners) and, in particular, local communities?**	Level: GCRF Awards Lines of enquiry: ▪ How have GCRF researchers engaged with stakeholders and local communities in the global South? ▪ How have fairness issues emerged and been addressed? *Note: Our analysis with reference to this sub-EQ is necessarily less in-depth, given our inability to engage directly with in-country stakeholders. While we use this phase of the analysis to gather researchers' views on how fairness issues emerged in their broader engagements at various stages of the research process, we remain aware that this is a partial, and possibly biased, picture, as it does not draw on the views of those at the receiving end of engagement efforts.*	Document review KIIs

2.3   Selection and sampling

Selection of strategic documentation (BEIS and DPs). An initial web search was conducted by different members of the evaluation team for GCRF-related documentation across DPs' websites. The documents resulting from this search, along with any other documentation shared by BEIS and DPs, were saved in a cross-module data folder and summarised in a spreadsheet. The documents were then rapidly scanned by the Fairness module coordinator, and each document was rated for relevance to the module on a scale of 1–5, depending on whether (1) it was a core strategic document for GCRF and/or (2) had a specific focus on partnerships and/or stakeholder engagement. All documents rated 3 or higher were then reviewed and coded.

Selection of funding call documentation (DPs). The original intention was to review a representative sample of funding calls across DPs. However, as we did not have access to a comprehensive list of GCRF funding calls, we took a different approach. First, we compiled a list of GCRF funding calls through a web search; then, once the Fairness sample was identified, we checked the original funding calls for the sampled awards, and we added any funding call that was not in our original list.

Selection of programme partnerships. The two programme partnerships selected (UKRI/ARUA and Royal Society/African Academy of Sciences (AAS)) were the only two GCRF partnerships that we were aware of which linked GCRF DPs with research institutions with a regional focus in the global South. The partnerships were also included in the Management review sample, which enabled us to coordinate interviews and share data.

Sampling of awards. For sub-EQs 4 and 5, we focused on a sample of sample of 48 GCRF awards.

We included two 'types' of sample to promote integration across GCRF evaluation modules (a common sample) as well as to allow module-specific sampling (Fairness-specific sample). Of the 48 awards in our sample, 22 were part of the cross-module sample and the remaining 26 were in the Fairness-specific sample. The sampling strategy is described in Box 6 and in more detail in Annex 2, which also includes a breakdown of the sample by DP, Challenge area, size and start year.

Box 6.Box 6 – Common sample and Fairness-specific sample

The Stage 1a Common sample used a stratified random sampling approach to identify awards across the GCRF portfolio, corresponding to the five focus countries and the five focus Challenge Areas agreed in collaboration with BEIS. The aim was to ensure that a core set of awards was assessed from each module's perspective, to help identify connections and crossovers across the modules. All the awards in the common sample were included in the sample for the Fairness review. The common sample provides a representative account of how Fairness issues have been addressed in the GCRF as a whole.

The Fairness-specific sample used a purposive and targeted sampling approach to identify awards with particular relevance for the module, as they could showcase 'best practice' and/or provide insights into specific challenges and learning. Given the wide variety of degrees and modalities of partnership and stakeholder engagement in the wide GCRF portfolio, we anticipated that good practice and learning would not necessarily emerge spontaneously from a random/stratified sample and will require a more targeted search. The Fairness-specific sample was generated through a combination of: funding calls analysis; keyword analysis of project abstract; and an open call for interesting fairness experiences, by which GCRF project teams, DPs and other key informants nominate projects for potential showcase experiences of partnership and engagement.

2.4 Data collection and overview of the evidence base

A **literature review** was conducted in the initial phase of the evaluation to determine the current 'state of play' in the reflection on fairness in R4D and to identify key issues and challenges that have been highlighted in the literature in relation to international research partnerships and engagement with non-academic stakeholders. This was complemented by two region-specific brief literature reviews, conducted by regional partners Afidep (for Africa) and Athena Infonomics (for India and South Asia). The findings from the literature review helped to place the evaluation in context and to derive the analytical framework and research tools (coding framework, rubric, topic guides).

Three main methods for data collection were used: (1) document review; (2) semi-structured interviews with key informants (in BEIS, DPs, regional partners, and research teams); and (3) topic modelling and data mining using data science techniques.

Document review

In total, 418 documents were reviewed across all our lines of enquiry, as follows:

- Strategic documents: 39 key GCRF, UKRI and DP-level documents relating to strategy and framing, governance, monitoring and reporting, as well as previous reviews and evaluations. [sub-EQ1]

- Funding calls: documentation was reviewed for 69 funding calls (see Annex 4 for a list).[26] [sub-EQ2]
- Documentation related to the two regional partnerships analysed (ARUA/UKRI and AAS/Royal Society) as well as background documentation on ARUA and AAS. [sub-EQ3]
- Documentation related to individual awards: project proposals, Pathways to Impact document; reports and/or partnership agreements. [sub-EQs 4–5]

Semi-structured interviews

In total 138 interviews were conducted, as follows:

- BEIS and DPs: 18 interviews were conducted.[27] In some cases, these interviews were conducted by members of the Fairness team; in others, they were conducted by other teams, and fairness questions were asked. Interviews were conducted by videoconference and typically lasted 30–60 minutes, using a semi-structured approach based on the interview protocol provided in Annex 3.1.
- Programme partners: 4 interviews in total were conducted with the Royal Society, UKRI, the AAS and ARUA. Transcripts from interviews conducted by the Management review were also perused. The topic guide for these interviews is included in Annex 3.3.
- Award holders: We interviewed a total of 116 PIs and Co-Is from 48 projects – of which 72 were based in the global North and 44 in the global South. The number of interviewees per project ranged from 5 (3 projects) to 1 (13 projects). Interviews were conducted online and lasted 30–60 minutes. For the awards in the common sample, the interviews were conducted together with other module teams. The topic guide for award-level interviews is included in Annex 3.4.

Topic modelling and data mining

A portfolio analysis of UKRI awards was conducted using data available on the portal Gateway to Research (GtR).[28] The data science work encompasses both data collection and analysis using specialist techniques. In total, 1,135 UKRI awards were reviewed in this analysis. At the time, data sharing agreements were not yet in place with all the DPs, so the analysis was limited to publicly available data on GtR, which features only UKRI awards. The fact that no comparable portals are accessible for other DPs limited this part of the analysis to UKRI awards only, a bias that we tried to redress in our sampling strategy. For this set of awards, we carried out the following:

- Mapping of all formal partnerships in GCRF projects in terms of their geographical distribution and type of institutions involved
- Text mining of fairness-related keywords in project proposals and case-for-support documents
- Mapping of authorship of GCRF academic publications.

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26 A challenge in this regard was the absence of a comprehensive list of all GCRF funding calls. The list of 69 calls was generated through an online search, and then complemented by tracing back awards in our sample to their original funding call.

27 The breakdown of the interviews is as follows: BEIS (2); Academy of Medical Sciences (1); Royal Academy of Engineering (1); UKRI (4); Art and Humanities Research Council (2); Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (1); Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (1); Science and Technology Facilities Council (1); Medical Research Council (1); Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (1); UK Innovation (1); NI Department for the Economy (DfENI); Scottish Funding Council (1).

28 The Gateway to Research (GtR) portal was developed by the Research Councils to enable users to search and analyse information about publicly funded research. It includes information about projects supported by all seven Research councils, Innovate UK and NC3Rs. https://gtr.ukri.org/

2.5 Data analysis

Strategic-level analysis

Data from strategic document reviews and interviews was reviewed and coded using the MaxQDA software programme. The coding framework is included in Annex 3.2. A qualitative analysis was then conducted. This allowed us to build a picture of how the thinking around research fairness in strategy had developed.

Analysis of funding calls

Data from funding calls review was coded using MaxQDA. The coding framework is included in Annex 3.2. A matrix was then developed to compare funding calls across different dimensions. As our list of funding calls was neither comprehensive nor a representative sample of GCRF call, we refrained from drawing quantitative findings.

Award-level analysis

Data from award-level interviews and documentation review was summarised in award-level write-ups (the write-up template is included in Annex 3.5). The write-ups were then used to inform the qualitative analysis in response to sub-EQ4 and sub-EQ5.

To analyse award-level partnerships, we used a **rubric assessment**, which allowed us to rate the fairness of partnership according to the three dimensions of opportunity, process and benefits, as well as the strength of available evidence (see Table 4).

Table 5: Research Fairness assessment rubric

Absent	Beginning	Developing	Good	Exemplary
The award does not have any partner	The award has partnership but there is little or no consider-ation of fairness or equity	Attention is being paid to fairness and equity in at least one of the three dimensions; formalisation/ systemisation of fairness/equity considerations is limited	Attention is being paid to fairness and equity in at least two of the three dimensions; to at least some extent fairness/equity objectives have been formally articulated and there are clear, processes/ mechanisms in place	Attention is being paid to all three dimensions; to a large extent, fairness/equity objectives are formally articulated and delivered with the aid of clear, formalised processes/mechanisms
Confidence in evidence				
Red	Poor evidence: only one source, *or* multiple sources but scant/inconsistent findings			
Amber	Moderate evidence: 2 sources, *or* 3+ sources but no Southern representation, *and* generally robust and consistent findings			
Green	Good evidence: 3+ sources, including Southern representation, *and* robust and consistent findings			

For EQ5, the great diversity in the stakeholders involved and the forms of engagement, alongside the data limitations, made us decide against the use of a rubric assessment for this part of the analysis; we opted instead for a purely qualitative analysis.

2.6 Strengths and limitations of our approach

Overall, we consider our approach to have worked well in relation to the objectives of the evaluation, and we consider it to have a number of distinctive strengths. These include the following:

1. The **mixed methods approach** combined quantitative analysis of the portfolio as a whole (provided by Digital Science) and of the sample (MaxQDA coding) with qualitative analysis (mostly through semi-structured interviews), and allowed for a reasonable degree of triangulation. At the level of awards, using mixed methods enable us to gain a 'bird's-eye view' of the portfolio as a whole, combined with more in-depth analysis of our project sample. The rubric assessment enabled a degree of comparability of partnerships across projects.

2. The analysis was carried out at **different levels (BEIS, DPs, strategic partners, grant holders)**, thus enabling us to observe how strategic decisions and learning at the Fund management level trickle down (or not) to inform project management and, perhaps to a lesser extent, how issues emerging at the award level are escalated to feed into Fund-wide learning and inform decisions.

3. The **sampling strategy** combined a representative common (cross-module) sample with a purposive fairness sample (that allowed us to select awards with greater-than-average probability to include fairness and equity considerations and learning).

A number of important limitations should be noted:

Strategic-level analysis

- In order to avoid an excessive burden for DPs, it was decided to **limit engagement for most informants to one interview**, which was led by evaluation team members asking questions for three modules (Relevance, Fairness and GESIP). This format limited the scope for module-specific follow-up questions and thus the richness of findings. For the Research Fairness module, this meant that our findings on the inclusion of Southern expertise and fairness considerations in agenda-setting, decision making, evaluation – and the consequent redesign of systems and procedures – are limited. We flag this as an area for further in-depth DP engagement in the next phase of the evaluation.

Funding calls analysis

- The combination of data limitations and compressed timeline particularly affected our **analysis of the commissioning process** (sub-EQ2). In particular, we were unable to obtain a full list of GCRF funding calls across DPs, which would have allowed for comprehensive coding and Fund-wide quantitative analysis across the key dimensions of partnership and engagement. In the absence of such a comprehensive list, we derived a sample list of 69 funding calls, partly through Internet research and partly by tracing back our sample of awards to their respective funding calls. We were also unable to interview members of peer review and assessment panels or to access guidance for reviewers and minutes of selection meetings. We flag this as a consideration for the next phase of the evaluation.

Analysis of programme partnerships

- The **analysis of programme partnerships** was limited to desk review and interviews with DPs and representatives of partner institutions at the regional level (ARUA and AAS). We have not engaged with the researchers and institutions who are expected to benefit from these collaborations, and therefore are unable to elaborate on how well

the partnerships are working to strengthen research systems in Africa. We flag this as an area of priority for the next phase of the evaluation.

Award-level analysis

- The main effect of the Covid-19 pandemic was the delayed start of the award-level data collection phase, with interviews starting several months later than originally anticipated. The consequent **compressed timeline for engaging with award holders** affected the analysis in several ways. Academics were contacted in the autumn, at a time where many of them were dealing with the start of the new academic year and the demands of planning and delivering online learning. This appeared to be a particular issue with UK-based PIs, a few of whom declined participation, citing excessive workload, while several others were unresponsive. The last phase of the interviews coincided with the Christmas holidays, further limiting responses. We are pleased that in spite of the time constraints and Covid-specific limitations, we were able to closely approximate the target number of awards examined and key informant interviews (KIIs).

- The **compressed timeline for sample data analysis** – a direct consequence of the point above – led to the need to distribute the awards among a team of six analysts, with a potential risk of inconsistency in analysis and rubric application. To offset this risk, one analyst reviewed all the write-ups at the end to flag any obvious inconsistency and revise rubric assessment accordingly. Still, the risk of different application of rubrics cannot be completely discounted.

- For the common sample**, interviews were combined with other modules**, meaning there was very little time to explore Fairness-specific questions. This has limited the depth and nuance of our primary data.

- The analysis draws on **self-reported views** of researchers, which is a particular limitation when it comes to assessment of engagement with external stakeholders (beyond formal partners) and local communities, for which no direct engagement was possible. Furthermore, while we have attempted to conduct interviews with individual researchers, this was not always possible, and **group interviews** were conducted on several occasions. We are aware of the risk of this format influencing the views expressed, in particular by junior and/or Southern researchers.

- There was great variation in the **number and type of award-level documents that were available for us to review**, which is reflected in the varying 'strength of evidence' of our award analysis.

- The fact that many **awards are still ongoing** limited our findings with regard to fairness of benefits. We sought to focus our discussions with the project teams on 'anticipated' benefits from the partnership, but at times it was difficult to have informants reflect on the specifics of benefits that had not accrued yet.

- Across all the EQs, **our analysis focuses mostly on UKRI compared with other DPs.** There are several reasons for this. UKRI has taken a leading role in the effort to increase the fairness, equity and representativeness of GCRF partnerships, as recognised by other DPs. UKRI is also part of the two programme partnerships that we examine as part of sub-EQ3. The GtR Portal gave us greater access to UKRI award information, and for this reason the data science analysis is based only on UKRI data (which had spill-over effects for sample identification). As a result, important experiences on GCRF partnerships (such as the UK Space Agency (UKSA) International Partnership Programme) have not been within the scope of this phase of the evaluation.

- Our analysis of contextual fairness was considerably limited by the fact that **our timeline and resources did not include the possibility of consulting with external stakeholders** to capture independent perspectives on the impact of GCRF on the research ecosystem in the global South.

3 Results

This section summarises our key findings in relation to how fairness issues have been conceived in GCRF vision and strategy, how they have been operationalised through the GCRF commissioning process, and how they have played out in practice.

3.1 To what extent have considerations of fairness been reflected in GCRF strategy, agenda-setting, vision of impact and decision-making structures?

> **Box 7.Summary of findings**
>
> - Equitable partnerships are widely seen as a key foundation of GCRF.
> - The ICAI Review (2017) provided urgency and momentum for a reflection on how to operationalise the principles of equitable partnership across GCRF.
> - UKRI has taken a leading role in this process, particularly through a number of engagement events that helped to build a common understanding across DPs, although significant differences remain.
> - While there have been some attempts to strengthen Southern voices and perspectives to inform GCRF governance and decision making, progress in this respect remains limited and mostly confined to the commissioning process.
> - There is emerging attention to issues of fairness when conducting research in local communities, with an emphasis on safeguarding.
> - Questions of contextual fairness are acknowledged, but do not appear to be systematically addressed at the strategic level.

Equitable partnerships are widely seen as a key foundation of GCRF. Across BEIS and DPs there is widespread recognition of the need for meaningful and equitable engagement of Southern partners. The *UK Strategy for the Global Challenges Research Fund* (2017) makes a number of points in this regard:

- Involvement of partners in the global South in research design is integral to ensuring research relevance, as well as supporting research uptake and impact.[29]
- Capacity building (of both UK and Southern researchers) is presented as a key benefit of partnerships.[30] The GCRF strategy includes a commitment to strengthening the capacity of Southern research institutions through partnerships with UK institutions.[31]
- GCRF commits to ensuring that 'researchers within developing countries are able to access funding to support partnerships on an equitable basis that is consistent with the UK commitment to untied aid'.[32]
- In addition to the vital role played by partnerships for impact at the project level, the strategy stresses that 'there is also significant opportunity for the GCRF to add value through working in partnership at a strategic level with other international

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[29] BEIS (2017). UK Strategy for the Global Challenges Research Fund.

[30] BEIS, (2017), p.6.

[31] This aim is also captured in the BEIS ODA Statement of Intent, which expects substantial progress by 2021 in 'increasing the science and innovation capability of partner countries.' (BEIS (2017). UK Strategy for the Global Challenges Research Fund. p.4. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/623825/global-challenges-research-fund-gcrf-strategy.pdf

32 BEIS (2017), p.6.

development organisations and agencies' in both 'developed and developing countries'.[33]

The approach to equitable partnerships has evolved since the start of the Fund. DP informants have repeatedly made the point that promoting equitable partnerships is both important and difficult and that GCRF has undergone a significant learning curve, so that – in the word of one DP interviewee – the Fund today is 'in quite a different place compared to when we started'.[34] Another DP informant expressed a similar sentiment by saying that equitable partnerships are 'difficult to do well, but we have learned to do it better'.[35] The focus on equity went from being mostly about process to encompassing broader considerations of opportunities and benefits. While the ICAI review has provided momentum and urgency for such renewed focus on equitable partnerships, informants stressed that it would be reductive to see these changes as merely a response to external criticism.

> *Collaboration with Southern partners has gained greater emphasis within GCRF; it is still patchy, but there are important and creative efforts that can be built upon.* (GCRF Evaluation Management Review – Guthrie *et al.* 2021:21)

UKRI has taken a leading role in the effort to increase the fairness, equity and representativeness of GCRF partnerships. In the words of one respondent, UKRI was instrumental in broadening the way in which 'equity' is understood in GCRF, beyond a basic focus on process and cost-sharing.[36]In particular, UKRI led a number of initiatives that were consistently mentioned by DPs as milestones in this process:

* **'Promoting Fair and Equitable Research Partnerships to Respond to Global Challenges' project** (2018). The project, funded by UKRI and implemented by the Rethinking Research Collaborative network,[37] aimed to bring to the forefront the voice and perspectives of academics and practitioners based in the global South with regard to fair and equitable partnerships. The final report identified eight principles of fair and equitable partnerships, and suggested recommendations to UKRI for putting the principles into practice (see Box 7).[38] One DP interviewee remarked how this was 'a really useful opportunity to stop and reflect'.[39]

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[33] BEIS (2017), p.8.

[34] DP66.

[35] DP22.

[36] DP62.

[37] The Rethinking Research Collaborative (RRC) is an informal international network of academics, civil society organisations and social movements, international NGOs, and research support providers who are committed to working together to explore the politics of evidence and participation in knowledge for international development. The RRC aims to encourage more inclusive, responsive and transformative collaboration to improve the production of useful research for social justice and global development. (https://rethinkingresearchcollaborative.com/)

[38] RRC (2018).

[39] DP66.

> **Box 8.Box 7 – Eight principles for improving practice (RCC – Promoting Fair and Equitable Research Partnerships to Respond to Global Challenges, 2018)**
>
> - **Put poverty first.** Constantly question how research is addressing the end goal of reducing poverty by better designing and evaluating how the research will have a real world impact.
> - **Critically engage with context(s).** Consider how representative of different countries these partnerships and governance systems are, and commit to strengthening research ecosystems in the global South.
> - **Redress evidence hierarchies.** Incentivise intellectual leadership by Southern-based academics and civil society practitioners and engage communities throughout.
> - **Adapt and respond.** Take an adaptive approach that is responsive to context.
> - **Respect diversity of knowledge and skills.** Take time to explore the knowledge, skills and experience that each partner brings and consider different ways of representing research.
> - **Commit to transparency.** Put in place a Code of Conduct or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU0 that commits to transparency in all aspects of the project administration and budgeting.
> - **Invest in relationships.** Create spaces and commit funded time to establish, nurture and sustain relationships at the individual and institutional level.
> - **Keep learning.** Reflect critically within and beyond the partnership.

- **UKRI–KFPE Workshop 'Working in Effective Partnerships to Address the Sustainable Development Goals'** (Dar es Salaam, September 2018). The workshop, organised by UKRI together with the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE), aimed to explore what constitutes best practice in research partnerships, how to engage researchers and governments from the global South in research programme agenda-setting, and how to translate research outputs into development impact. The event brought together representatives from universities and other academic institutions in Africa, and resulted in a series of recommendations for funders on how to support equitable partnerships at various stages of the research cycle: in the application and assessment processes; during the lifetime of the projects; and after the project's completion.[40]

- **UKRI Equitable Partnerships Good Practice Handbook (2019).** In June 2019, UKRI brought together GCRF and Newton Fund DPs in a workshop to share good practice approaches to promote and sustain equitable partnerships. The outputs of the discussions were captured in a good practice handbook for funding agency staff who work on GCRF, the Newton Fund, and other ODA-funded R4D programmes. The handbook aims 'to provide staff with information about good practice for developing and running calls that include partnerships between funders and researchers/innovators in the global North and global South, to promote and enable equitable partnerships'.[41] From our interviews, it emerges that DPs have found the workshop, and resulting handbook, extremely useful to establish common ground around equitable partnerships.[42] One interviewee described the workshop as an 'eye-opening' event.[43]

Attempts to strengthen Southern involvement in GCRF governance and decision making have been extremely limited. The Management review highlights an increase in Southern

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[40] SCNAT (2019). Working in Effective Partnerships to Address Sustainable Development Goals. *UKRI-KFPE Workshop in Tanzania.* https://scnat.ch/en/uuid/i/5b3dfc89-2a5b-529d-8564-f769d69601a1-Working_in_Effective_Partnerships_to_Address_Sustainable_Development_Goals

[41] UKRI (2019). Equitable Partnerships Good Practice Handbook.

[42] DP16; DP27; DP37.

[43] DP16.

representation in the Strategic Advisory Group (SAG),[44] while noting that the majority of members are still based at UK institutions.[45] The incorporation of Southern perspectives has been largely confined to the funding process, as discussed in the next section.

There have been some efforts at outreach towards Southern institutions, to make the GCRF 'known' and broaden the pool of Southern institutions and researchers. In particular, Global Engagement Meetings took place in late 2017/early 2018 in Bogota (Colombia), New Delhi (India), Pretoria (South Africa) and Nairobi (Kenya). These meetings aimed to showcase the opportunities available through the Fund, to bring together researchers from the UK and the global South and to discuss opportunities for maximising the contribution of GCRF research into policy and practice. As reported by a senior DP informant, the discussions gave a voice to participants to highlight their previous experience of exploitative research relations, and thus further reinforced the focus on equitable partnerships in GCRF.[46]

The awareness of, and approach to, equitable partnerships across DPs remains uneven. In two cases, informants noted that DPs had limited clout on equitable partnerships, which were seen as happening primarily at the project level and thus were mostly a responsibility of research teams and their institutions.[47] When asked about progress in promoting equitable partnership and Southern engagement, DP informants mostly referred to changes in the commissioning process (discussed below in section 3.2) and strategic partnerships with Southern institutions (section 3.3).

More recently, the issue of fairness in engaging with local communities has come to the fore, albeit mostly limited to safeguarding considerations. BEIS and UKRI have been supporting (as part of the UKCDR Safeguarding Funders' Group) the development of the UKCDR *Guidance on Safeguarding in International Development Research* (2020), which has a specific focus on interaction with local communities (both research participants and non-participants). [48] Beyond safeguarding, two RCs (AHRC and ESRC) have engaged in a reflection on the opportunities and challenges of conducting research in and with Indigenous communities (see Box 8).

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44 The role of the Strategic Advisory Group is to advise on the strategic development and delivery of the Fund. Members use their knowledge and networks to advise on a strategic research agenda and prioritisation of challenge topics; the effectiveness of DPs' strategies and mechanisms; integration of ODA and non-ODA challenge research; allocation of research funding; and engagement of stakeholder communities. UKRI (2020c). Strategic Advisory Group.

https://www.ukri.org/our-work/collaborating-internationally/global-challenges-research-fund/strategic-advisory-group/

45 Only one member of the SAG is based in a Southern institution (African Institute for Development Policy, Malawi office). UKRI (2020), Strategic Advisory Group.

46 DP58.

47 DP21; DP34.

48 Balch *et al.* (2020).

Source: People's Palace Projects (n.d.); Fassetta *et al* (2020).

> **Box 9.Box 8 – International Seminar on Indigenous engagement, research partnerships and knowledge mobilisation (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, March 2019)**
>
> In 2019, two GCRF DPs (AHRC and ESRC) invited current and previous GCRF award holders to bid for funding to produce reflective pieces in conjunction with the Indigenous researchers and communities with which they were working. 12 collaborative projects were selected, and the PIs and Indigenous partners from 10 different countries were brought together at the Indigenous Engagement, Research Partnerships and Knowledge Mobilisation in Rio de Janeiro. The workshop offered a rare opportunity for an open discussion around opportunities and challenges facing Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and their institutions.
>
> Gaps in current research with Indigenous communities were identified around three main points: insufficient considerations of diversity between and within Indigenous communities; lack of open and frank reflection on challenges or missteps or ineffective practices; lack of clarity on the ways in which methods are adapted to contexts and participants' characteristics and on the ways in which the information gathered is processed, translated and disseminated.
>
> Following the Rio de Janeiro seminar, an online event was organised in May 2020, to further discuss key themes related to engagement with Indigenous communities in research. The online event also provided an opportunity to reflect on how Indigenous communities were affected by Covid-19.

Questions of contextual fairness are acknowledged but remain peripherical to current GCRF strategy and agenda-setting. Several DPs' interviewees expressed awareness of the risks of privileging a limited number of well-established institutions in the global South, and the potential tensions between rewarding research excellence and strengthening research capacities.[49] However, there does not appear to be an ongoing process of reflection, at the strategic level, on how to tackle this challenge going forward.

3.2 To what extent have considerations related to fairness of partnerships and engagement informed GCRF funding decisions?

> **Box 10.   Summary of findings**
>
> - Equitable partnerships in relation to the funding process is one of the areas where fairness issues have advanced most significantly across GCRF.
> - There is limited evidence of Southern perspectives being incorporated in the 'upstream' prioritisation of areas for GCRF funding and design of funding calls as a whole, although there are discrete examples of good practice.
> - The focus on equitable partnerships in GCRF calls is stronger now compared to the early days of the Fund, with Southern representation and fairness issues in the selection process having improved significantly.
> - The emphasis and level of effort dedicated to fairness in relation to GCRF funding decisions varies widely across DPs and calls.
> - A number of new GCRF funding mechanisms have been created to mitigate issues that have hitherto constrained fairness, for example calls that are open to Southern lead applicants.

Changes in the funding process are among the key areas where fairness issues have been advanced in GCRF. The focus on fair partnerships in GCRF calls is stronger now compared to

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[49] For example, DP29 discussed the tension of working in South Africa, where, for historical reasons, high-performing research universities coexist with disadvantaged institutions who are much more in need of support.

the early days of the Fund, albeit there is significant variance between UKRI, the Academies, Funding Councils, UK Innovation and UKSA. In this section we assess such progress in relation to five dimensions:

1. Engagement of Southern stakeholders in the design of funding calls

2. Southern representation in the selection process (peer review and assessment panels)

3. Consideration given to fairness issues in the selection process

4. Openness and accessibility of funding opportunities to Southern applicants

5. Support provided to Southern applicants and partnership-building.

3.2.1 Engagement of Southern stakeholders in the design of funding calls

There is limited evidence of Southern perspectives being incorporated in the 'upstream' process of identification of funding priorities and in the design of funding calls in specific cases, although there are discrete examples of good practice. As highlighted in the UKRI Equitable Partnerships Good Practice Handbook, engagement of Southern stakeholders at the design phase is important to ensure relevance of GCRF funding to Southern priorities. The fact that 'themes/priorities for funding calls are determined by actors in the global North without consultation with relevant stakeholders in the global South' is a key source of power imbalance in the funding cycle.[50]

The Applied Global Health Research Board established by the Medical Research Council appears as an interesting example of 'upstream' involvement of Southern perspectives in the prioritisation of GCRF funding. The Board includes several members affiliated with institutions in Africa (6), Latin America (2) and Asia (3), along with institutions in UK (15) and the United States (1). The Board is responsible for allocating MRC's GCRF funding, emphasising capacity building and equal partnership between UK and LMIC counterparts.[51] That there is such an example in medical science reflects the observation made by a senior Southern academic informant, who noted how there is a stronger tradition of equitable partnerships (including joint proposal writing) in the natural (and particularly medical) sciences, compared to the social sciences.[52]

The Research Excellence Grants, funded through the UKRI–ARUA partnerships, appear as a promising example of Southern-led funding priorities. Those are discussed in section 3.3.1 below.

3.2.2 Southern representation in the award selection process

- **Involvement of Southern representation and perspectives in the selection process has increased since the start of GCRF.** As noted in the Management review, most DPs now incorporate Southern perspectives in the review and selection of awards (e.g. having Southern peer reviewers and assessors); however, the way in which this happens is not consistent across the Fund.[53] An example of Southern involvement, highlighted in the Management Reviews, is given by the GCRF Networking Grants, funded by the Academies. The scheme requires joint applications from researchers affiliated to institutions in DAC-listed countries and UK-based researchers, with applications being reviewed by a panel with a degree of LMIC representation.

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[50] UKRI (2019); DP34.

[51] Management review reference.

[52] DP106.

[53] Guthrie *et al.* (2021). Global Challenges Research Fund report on management. (Unpublished).

- **An important step in this direction has been the establishment by UKRI of the International Development Peer Review College.** This is a pool of around 300 global academics, researchers, policymakers and NGO and charity ODA experts,[54] 90% of whom are from DAC list recipient countries[55] (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 and other ODA-funded calls within UKRI. Specific aims of the college are 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; and facilitate closer engagement with peer reviewers from the global South to provide training and capacity building in interdisciplinary peer review.[56] The 2019 ICAI follow-up noted the establishment of the college as a sign of progress in GCRF's approach to equitable partnerships.

3.2.3 Consideration given to fairness issues in the selection process

Equitable partnerships are given increasing weight in GCRF funding call requirements, although the emphasis and degree of details varies widely across DPs and calls. Several DPs interviewed have highlighted progress in this regard, in the form of clearer language in funding calls, more explicit requirements, and clearer guidance given to peer reviewers and assessment panels.[57] Our own analysis of documentation of 67 funding calls confirms these observations, but also highlights significant variation among calls in relation to the degree of emphasis and detail on fairness and equity. Funding calls vary widely, with no easily discernible pattern, in terms of whether North–South partnerships are 'encouraged' or 'required', as well as whether non-academic institutions are mentioned as potential partners.

A 'statement of expectations' on equitable partnerships is routinely included in UKRI calls. The statement was developed during the UKRI–KFPE workshop and reads:

> *The partnership should aim to be equitable and transparent. There should be clearly articulated equitable distribution of resources, responsibilities, effort and benefits. The partnership should ensure the ethical sharing and use of data which is responsive to the identified needs of society. The process should be based on mutual respect and be guided by mutual trust, accountability, transparency, effective communication, constructive engagement and mutual learning. The partnership should recognise the value of different inputs, different interests and different desired outcomes.*

3.2.4 Openness and accessibility of funding opportunities to Southern applicants

A number of GCRF funding calls have been opened to Southern lead applicants. The opening of funding calls to PIs from the global South has been the most frequently mentioned example of improved Southern engagement in interviews with DPs, and it was also noted in the ICAI follow-up review.[58] It was frequently noted in interviews that limiting applicants to UK PIs was a key obstacle to fairness and equity in GCRF. Combined with very tight time frames for

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[54] UKRI (2020a).

[55] UKRI (2020a), Annex B2.

[56] https://www.ukri.org/apply-for-funding/how-we-make-decisions/international-development-peer-review-college/

[57] DP40; DP66; DP85.

[58] ICAI (2019); DP82.

submission of applications, this could result in UK academics just randomly calling up academics in the South to include them in bids.[59] Allowing non-UK applicants was not straightforward, mostly because of 'the perceived capacity of [non-UK] institutions to meet obligations such as financial management and oversight, in line with UK requirements'.[60]

Out of 69 calls analysed for this review, 20 were either open to or reserved for Southern applicants.[61] The funding documents vary in terms of: whether Southern leadership is allowed, encouraged or required; whether there is a need to have a UK partner or not; whether there are particular geographical requirements (e.g. being based in a certain region on which the call focuses, or being based in the country where the research will take place), or other conditions (e.g. having been a grant-holder before). The example of the Global Engagement Network, discussed in Box 9, represents an important step in this journey.[62]

Despite these efforts, opening up calls to Southern applicants is not enough to have a level playing field. DP informants stressed how the simple fact of allowing Southern leads in GCRF calls is not enough to ensure Southern voice and representation, and that more targeted efforts were necessary to offset the structural biases of the application process.[63] This point is also recognised in the Management review:

> *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.[64]*

Box 11.   Box 9 – Global Engagement Networks

One of the ways in which GCRF has promoted a greater voice of Southern partners has been the establishment for the Global Engagement Networks, funded through the UKRI GCRF Collective Programme. The Network Director had to be based in an eligible institution in a country on the OECD/DAC list; however, the funding call document stressed that such eligibility of non-UK PI was not to be considered as a precedent to confer eligibility for future calls.

The Networks are intended to promote Southern engagement, interdisciplinarity and interaction with non-academic users, and to engage with GCRF Challenge Leaders to feed into the future strategy for GCRF portfolios.

Twenty Networks have been funded, dealing with a range of key development challenges spanning the six strategic GCRF Challenge portfolios. Leading institutions are based in Africa (Kenya, Ghana, Malawi, Rwanda, South Africa), the Americas (Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, Jamaica, Peru), Asia (India, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Vietnam), and Europe (Belarus). Ten Network leads (half of the total) are based in upper-middle-income countries; eight are based in lower-middle-income countries, and two in low-income countries (Malawi and Rwanda).

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[59] DP106.

[60] Guthrie *et al.* (2021), p.25.

[61] DP distribution of these calls was: UKRI (5); MRC (6); AHRC (3); ESRC (1); Royal Society (2); Royal Academy of Engineering (3). The calls were a mix of research grants and other type of grants (Fellowships, Innovation Prize).

[62] DP66.

[63] DP82; similar points were made also by DP7 and DP34.

[64] Guthrie *et al.* (2021), p.30.

Source: GCRF global engagement networks.
https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20200923114441/https://www.ukri.org/files/funding/gcrf/global-engagement-networks-full-call-document-pdf/

3.2.5   Support for partnership-building

A number of funding calls have been launched with a specific focus on partnership development. Examples of this are the Network Plus model, which has been adopted in a number of UKRI/RC calls (see Box 10) and the Networking Grants funded by the Academies as part of the Resilient Futures programme (see Box 11).

> **Box 12.   Box 10 – Network Plus Funding Model (UKRI)**
>
> The Network Plus model explicitly aims at facilitating the development of partnerships between academics, NGOs, policymakers and practitioners in the global North and the global South. Through this flexible mechanism, funding is allocated to a lead Research Organisation to support a cross-institutional leadership team and academic and non-academic partners in the UK and internationally. The model has been used in some calls under the UKRI GCRF Collective Programme – such as the GCRF Education as a Driver of Sustainable Development Network Plus and the GCRF Gender and Intersectionality Network Plus calls, both launched in 2019.

Source: GCRF Network Plus.
https://ahrc.ukri.org/funding/internationalfunding/ the-global-challenges-research-fund/gcrf-network-plus/

> **Box 13.   Box 11 – Networking Grants (Academies)**
>
> The Networking Grants scheme, funded by the Academies under the GCRF Resilient Futures programme, allows researchers from across disciplines and from developing countries and the UK to hold networking events, to forge new links and generate innovative transdisciplinary research ideas to address global challenges. The expectation is that these new networks will be better equipped to apply for larger grants offered by GCRF or other funding initiatives. Applications should be submitted jointly by a lead overseas researcher from a developing country and a lead researcher based in the UK.

Source: GCRF Networking Grants.
https://acmedsci.ac.uk/grants-and-schemes/grant-schemes/gcrf-networking-grants

Given that a lack of time and resources are frequently cited as constraints limiting meaningful engagement with academic and non-academic stakeholders during the proposal development stage, logically the creation of these partnership-building awards should (over time) help to create the time and space necessary for partners to build more equitable relationships.

3.3   How effectively have issues related to fairness been addressed in programme-level partnerships between DPs and regional institutions in the global South?

> **Box 14.** **Summary of findings**
>
> - The establishment of strategic partnerships between GCRF DPs and institutions in the global South represents a key aspect of GCRF commitment to strengthening equitable partnerships and Southern involvement.
> - Both of the programme partnerships reviewed appear to have worked well, with Northern and Southern lead partners expressing satisfaction with the collaboration.
> - There are indications that this type of equitable engagement with well-established, well-respected pan-African institutions could potentially play a bridging role to bring a broader variety of institutions (in terms of size and type) into the GCRF sphere.
> - However, fundamental issues – such as finding the right balance between research excellence and capacity building – must be addressed in order to maximise impact.

The establishment of strategic partnerships between GCRF DPs and institutions in the global South represents a key aspect of GCRF commitment to strengthening equitable partnerships and Southern involvement. These partnerships were cited by several interviewees as a sign of progress in GCRF thinking about Southern engagement, and also considered as such by the ICAI follow-up review. For this evaluation, we consider two prominent examples of such partnerships: the partnership between UKRI and ARUA; and the partnership between the Royal Society and AAS for Future Leaders – Africa Independent Research (FLAIR).

3.3.1 UKRI–ARUA programme partnership

ARUA is a network of 16 research universities in nine African countries, with the aim of improving the quality of research conducted in Africa by African researchers.[65] Modelled on networks such as the UK Russell Group, ARUA was inaugurated in Dakar in 2015. Central to ARUA is the system of 'Centres of Excellence', hosted by member universities. There are currently 13 Centres of Excellence, each focusing on specific areas of the SDGs.[66] These are intended to be focal points for aggregating world-class researchers from member universities to undertake collaborative research in priority thematic areas while providing opportunities for graduate students from the region and elsewhere to work with the researchers. The structure of the Centres of Excellence uses a spoke-hub paradigm, in which a Centre of Excellence focused on a specific area of the SDGs is a 'Centre Hub', and where 'nodes' help with this area of research.

The ARUA–UKRI Partnership Programme is a £20 million investment, funded through GCRF, aimed at addressing the SDGs through Africa-UK research collaborations (see Box 12). UKRI and ARUA informants stressed that the partnership was an 'easy fit' for the two organisations given their shared objectives.

Both UKRI and ARUA have expressed satisfaction with the partnership.[67] The collaboration appears to have worked well and no particular challenges were highlighted, apart from the external challenges due to Covid-19, which have led to activities being delayed and/or modified for online delivery. Based on the model of the programme partnership with UKRI,

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[65] Fransman *et al.* (2021). These are: the University of Addis Ababa (Ethiopia); Makerere University (Uganda); Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, University of Lagos and University of Ibadan (Nigeria); Université Cheikh Anta Diop (Senegal); Rhodes University, University of Cape Town, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, University of Pretoria, University of Stellenbosch, University of the Witwatersrand (South Africa); University of Rwanda; University of Ghana; University of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania); University of Nairobi (Kenya).

[66] These are: Energy, Unemployment and Skills Development; Non-Communicable Diseases; Inequalities research; Notions of Identity in Africa; Migration and Mobility; Food Security; Urbanisation and Habitable Cities; Climate and Development; Good Governance; Post-Conflict Societies; Water; Materials, Energy and Nanotechnology. https://arua.org.za/centres-of-excellence/

[67] DP84; DP106.

ARUA is now engaging with a range of other donors and partners – including UK university networks such as the Russell Group and the N8.

Box 15.   Box 12 – UKRI–ARUA Programme Partnership

The UKRI–ARUA Programme Partnership was launched in 2019 as an initiative of the General Secretary of ARUA, Ernest Aryeetey, and the UKRI's International Champion, Andrew Thompson. It has three main objectives:

- To build significant capacity for science and research across African universities
- To provide opportunities for African research teams and GCRF grant holders to co-create new projects that build on current investments by GCRF and ARUA
- To build equitable collaborations to strengthen capacity for research, innovation and knowledge exchange in both the UK and developing countries.

In support of these objectives, UKRI provides funding for two types of awards:

- Capacity-building award. All 13 Centres of Excellence were given the same capacity building award of £600,000. Of this, 70% is allocated to capacity building (for activities such as organising workshops and mentoring); 20% is for scoping studies (to identify challenges in Africa that are specifically related to the SDGs, and how can research be used to address this challenge); and 10% is for administrative purposes.[68]
- Research excellence award. Centres must apply directly to UKRI for the Research Excellence award, up to a maximum value of £2 million.

UKRI funding has also provided the programme with an increased focus on safeguarding to protect vulnerable groups from harm. UKRI did this by making additional £5,000 in funding available for each PI on a grant to train up all staff involved in the grant. This was greatly appreciated by ARUA and seen as a sign of UKRI's commitment to safeguarding.

The MoU between ARUA and UKRI states that the GCRF will contribute funding annually for each Centre of Excellence, subject to the satisfactory provision of annual review documentation regarding quality and funding assurance from the centres. The MoU that guides the partnership is underpinned by a Joint ARUA–UKRI Research Board, co-chaired by the Secretary-General of ARUA and the UKRI GCRF Champion. The Board meets at least once a year, approves programmes of work and funding, receives annual progress reports, and is supported by ARUA and UKRI. To support the delivery, the programme funds a project coordinator who is based in ARUA in Ghana and acts as a link between UKRI, the PIs on the grants, and ARUA.

The partnership is seen by ARUA as an important step away from the still-prevailing practice of Northern partners approaching Southern partner with a 'take it or leave it' attitude, to participate in bids and projects that are largely 'done deals'. Contrary to this tokenistic approach, engagement of Southern researchers in research design has been crucial to the ethos and practice of the programme partnership. A difference between social and natural sciences was noted in this respect, with progress going much faster in the latter. In the natural sciences there is a longer history of applications coming from African researchers (for example for the World Health Organization (WHO) or Wellcome Trust funding). Social scientists are, on average, less experienced in writing grant applications, and ARUA is running targeted workshops to address this.[69]

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[68] Guthrie *et al.* (2021).

[69] DP106.

> *The main lesson from the ARUA–UKRI partnership is that research equity is possible. My hope is that once GCRF shows the way, other funders will follow. (Professor Ernest Aryeetey, ARUA Secretary-General)*

To date, the work of ARUA (and the programme partnership as a result) has been concentrated in a limited number of Anglophone countries. Only one ARUA university is in a Francophone country (Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar, Senegal).[70] Six universities are in South Africa, five are in lower-middle-income countries (three in Nigeria and one each in Kenya and Ghana), and only four are in lower-income countries (Tanzania, Senegal, Rwanda and Uganda). We gather that discussions are under way to expand networks to Northern African countries as well as to Francophone universities in Cameroon, although understandably these plans have been slowed down by Covid-19. This limited coverage raises questions about the representativeness of the network.

The hub-and-spoke model holds potential for overcoming some of the challenges that GCRF has faced to date in reaching out to smaller, less well-established institutions in the global South. This model relies on 'stronger' universities to build the capacity of 'weaker' ones. Yet beyond consideration of capacity, questions remain about power dynamics and priority setting. The limitations of this review have not allowed us to examine in more detail the functioning of the hub-and-spoke model. Moreover, we gather from interviews with ARUA and UKRI that Covid-19 and related restrictions have affected the functioning of the model, as planned activities had to be cancelled or have transitioned online. We highlight this as an area for further analysis for the next phase of the evaluation, including by seeking the views of academic and non-academic staff in 'spoke' institutions.

3.3.2 Royal Society–AAS partnership: the FLAIR fellowships scheme

The FLAIR scheme is delivered in partnership by the Royal Society and AAS.[71] The stated aim of FLAIR is to 'produce Africa's next generation of independent research leaders undertaking cutting-edge research that will address global challenges facing Africa' (see Box 13).[72]

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[70] Since 2008, English is the language of education in Rwanda.

[71] The African Academy of Sciences is a pan-African organisation with a mandate to pursue excellence in research, provide advisory and think tank functions for shaping the continent's strategies and policies, and implement key science, technology and innovation programmes that impact developmental challenges. Its headquarters are in Nairobi, Kenya. https://www.aasciences.africa/

[72] Royal Society, FLAIR 2019 Scheme Notes. https://royalsociety.org/-/media/grants/schemes/FLAIR-scheme-notes.pdf (accessed 10 November 2019).

Box 16. **Box 13 – FLAIR fellowship scheme**

The FLAIR fellowship scheme was launched in 2018 as a collaboration of the Royal Society and AAS. Specific objectives of FLAIR are:

1. *Developing Africa's next generation of research leaders* – supporting talented early career African researchers to become leaders in their chosen discipline.

2. *Supporting excellent research* – enabling African researchers to address areas of global significance across the natural sciences through high-quality research, advancing knowledge and innovation, which aims to benefit their country and address aspects of the SDGs.

3. *Enhancing research environments* – working through relevant partners, contributing towards institutional research capacity strengthening and establishing good financial grant practice in African universities and research institutions.

4. *Fostering collaboration and impact* – establishing mutually beneficial long-term links between African Fellows and relevant UK researchers to harness the expertise of the UK research base through equitable partnerships and enhancing knowledge exchange and translation into sustainable policy and practical benefits.

FLAIR targets talented early career researchers, who are nationals of sub-Saharan African countries and wish to work in a research position in a sub-Saharan African host institution.[73] Research proposals must be within the Royal Society's remit of natural sciences, be ODA-compliant and focus on GCRF Challenge Areas. Host institutions must meet a series of criteria in terms of logistical and mentoring support to the fellows, and must allow them to focus on their research, with limited teaching responsibilities and no administrative duties. In addition, FLAIR aims at providing fellows with training, mentoring and networking support. In so doing, FLAIR directly addresses well-known challenges for African early career researchers, including: lack of funding; lack of time to focus on research because of competing teaching and administrative requirements; lack of mentoring; difficulties to travel and attend conferences. Two cohorts of fellows have been funded so far, in 2019 and 2020 respectively.

Both the Royal Society and AAS expressed great satisfaction with the partnership.[74] It was noted that, while at the earlier stages of the programme the Royal Society had a leading role in some aspects of delivery, it was now moving back from such 'hands-on' approach and enabling AAS to take on more responsibility and operate the programme through its system. This strategic partnership was noted by the ICAI follow-up review as one of the indications of greater engagement of GCRF with key stakeholders in the global South.

The FLAIR scheme has faced the challenge of reconciling the objectives of *research excellence* **and** *capacity strengthening***.** This has been particularly evident in terms of selection of fellows. The first call had a strong emphasis on research excellence, measured through the scientific merit of individual applicants, the robustness of the proposed research projects, and the suitability of the host institution. This resulted in a pool of fellows from a limited number of countries, as well as a predominance of large, well-established host institutions, the majority of which are in South Africa (see next point below). In Round 2, an explicit focus on capacity strengthening was added, looking at the potential for the fellowship to positively impact on the capacity of the individual researchers and their host institutions and countries, as well as its contribution to strengthening African capacity in a given field. There is, however, also a requirement for host institutions to be able to provide an appropriate research environment, training, mentoring and networking opportunities for fellows – all of which

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[73] This includes nationals of a sub-Saharan African country in the diaspora who wish to return to a research position in a sub-Saharan African country. Eligible host institutions include both public and private institutions of Higher Education and Research. For profit organisations are not eligible to host FLAIR fellows. Candidates can apply to hold the fellowship at their current institution in sub-Saharan Africa or to move to a new employing institution in sub-Saharan Africa.

[74] M51; M52.

presupposes an existing level of capacity. It is unclear how these various criteria, which are partially contradictory, are weighted against each other in the selection process.

The FLAIR scheme has so far engaged fellows from a limited number of countries, as well as a limited number of well-established institutions, with South Africa featuring prominently on both counts. Similarly to what was observed above for the ARUA–UKRI partnership, the engagement of the FLAIR programme has so far been mostly limited to a small number of Anglophone countries, with South Africa significantly topping the list in terms of both nationality of fellows and host institutions, and with Kenya a distant second.[75] Only four universities in lower-income countries have received FLAIR fellows: these are in Zimbabwe and The Gambia for the first round, and in Ethiopia and Uganda for the second round.

AAS and the Royal Society recognise this imbalance and efforts have been made to address it, 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. However, it mostly appears that this lack of regional diversity is a consequence of the above-mentioned unresolved tension between research excellence and capacity building, and as such it is unlikely to be addressed simply by minor changes in selection criteria or better communication.

3.3.3   Implications for contextual fairness

The creation of these programme-level partnerships clearly constitutes a significant step forward in GCRF thinking about Southern engagement. There are indications that this type of engagement with well-established, well-respected pan-African institutions could potentially play a bridging role to bring a broader variety of institutions (in terms of size and type) into the GCRF sphere. However, this is not a given, particularly if fundamental issues – such as finding the right balance between research excellence and capacity building – are not addressed. The way in which these tensions are navigated inevitably has effects in terms of who is included in – and, by implication, excluded from – GCRF-funded opportunities and networks. These issues are fundamental to the GCRF model and must be reflected upon and revisited at regular intervals to ensure that the maximum value is added (and minimal harm done) to research ecosystems at the local, national and continental levels.

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[75] In the 2019 intake, out of 23 fellows, just over half (12) were South African nationals, and five were Kenyan nationals. 15 fellows were going to South African Universities and five to Kenyan Universities. In the second round (2020 intake), there was more diversity in terms of countries, but South Africa and Kenya still topped the list. See https://www.aasciences.africa/news/african-academy-sciences-and-royal-society-announce-african-recipients-ps25m-flair-scheme (2019 fellows) and https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2020-05/aaos-2as051120.php (2020 fellows).

3.4 What do GCRF award-level partnerships look like in practice and how fair are the partnerships in relation to opportunities, process and sharing of benefits?

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Box 17.   **Summary of findings**

- There is great diversity in award-level partnerships in terms of numbers and roles of Southern researchers involved, as well as the attention given to equity and fairness in partnerships.
- The distribution of partnerships shows both 'depth' (a small number of countries and institutions with a high number of GCRF award partnerships) and 'spread' (a large number of countries and institutions with low-level GCRF engagement).
- Awards in our sample generally appear to have given consideration to fairness and equity. While available evidence is not sufficiently robust to make strong quantitative claims, qualitative analysis shows that many GCRF awards are based on well-functioning and mutually beneficial collaborations.
- Most partnerships emerge out of previous collaborations and personal connections. Compressed timelines in the proposal writing and design stages significantly curtail the possibility to establish new partnerships and involve Southern partners in research design.
- Administrative and financial requirements are widely perceived as significant challenges to fair process.
- While the picture on post-award benefits of partnerships is still emerging, it appears that, to date, co-authorship of publications has not been a significant benefit for Southern partners.
- Capacity strengthening appears to be approached mostly in an ad hoc fashion by GCRF awards.

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GCRF awards vary greatly in terms of numbers and roles of Southern researchers involved, as well as the attention given to equity and fairness in partnerships. The findings in this section are derived from two main sources: a portfolio-wide analysis of UKRI awards, using data mining and topic modelling, based on information available on the UKRI GtR portal[1]; and in-depth analysis of a sample of 48 awards, through desk review of documentation and interviews.

3.4.1 Mapping of UKRI GCRF award-level partnerships

The mapping of UKRI awards partnerships shows both *density* and *spread* of project partnerships. In other words, there are a few countries and institutions that account for a large share of UKRI GCRF partnerships, but the remaining share is distributed across a large number of institutions, which tend to have just one or two partnerships each.

A limited number of countries and institutions account for a significant share of the total number of UKRI GCRF award partnerships. Combined, the top four countries (South Africa, India, Kenya and Uganda) account for 32% of the UKRI total GCRF project partnerships and 38% of the total number of Southern researchers engaged in GCRF. Within these countries, a limited number of institutions account for most of the collaborations. The University of Cape Town and Makerere University top the list by any measure used. Other highly represented ones are University of Ghana, Stellenbosch University (South Africa) and the University of the Witwatersrand (South Africa).

This high density of partnerships partly reflects the tendency of UK researchers to go for 'tried and true' partners. This issue, already highlighted by the ICAI review, came up repeatedly in our interaction with both DPs and award holders. Contributing factors are the need for Southern partners to meet due diligence standards (which is difficult to do for smaller

institutions), as well as the tight time frames for most funding calls (which limit the possibility to identify and engage new partners). Continued partnerships undoubtedly have benefits in terms of effectiveness and equity as partners get to know each other and develop ways of working together. In fact, past R4D programmes have shown that building relations is a long-term process, and that '[t]he first collaboration among two partners may not be the most 'impactful', but may lay the foundations for future collaboration'.[76]

However, the concentration of a significant amount of funding, networking opportunities and influence in a limited number of institutions raises issues of 'contextual fairness' and appears at odds with stated capacity development objectives of ODA-funded research.

Alongside this concentration in a limited number of countries and institutions, however, **the mapping of UKRI award partnerships also shows significant spread of partnerships across countries,** including smaller academic institutions and non-academic institutions (government bodies, NGOs, international organisations and the private sector). Overall, 761 Southern institutions in 95 countries have been engaged in partners in UKRI GCRF awards. Of those, 307 (or 40%) have only one engagement (i.e. one researcher working on one award).

Figure 2: Figure 2: Countries where GCRF/UKRI project partnerships are based (by number of awards)
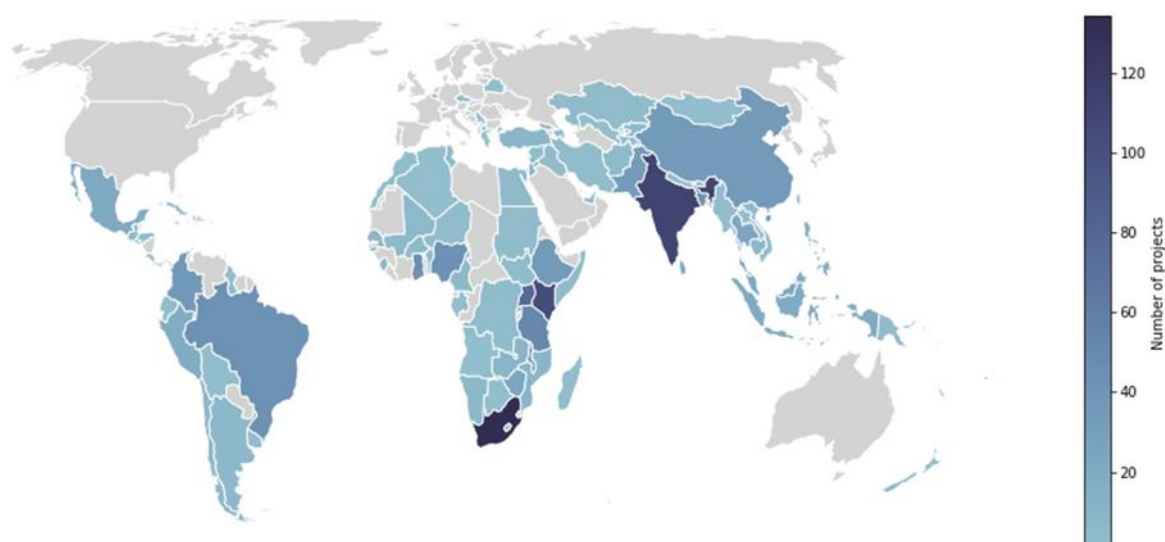
Source: GtR UKRI projects

3.4.2   Assessment of fairness and equity in award-level partnerships

The rubric assessment of the 48 awards in our sample shows that research teams generally appear to have given consideration to fairness and equity; however, available evidence is not sufficiently robust to make strong claims.

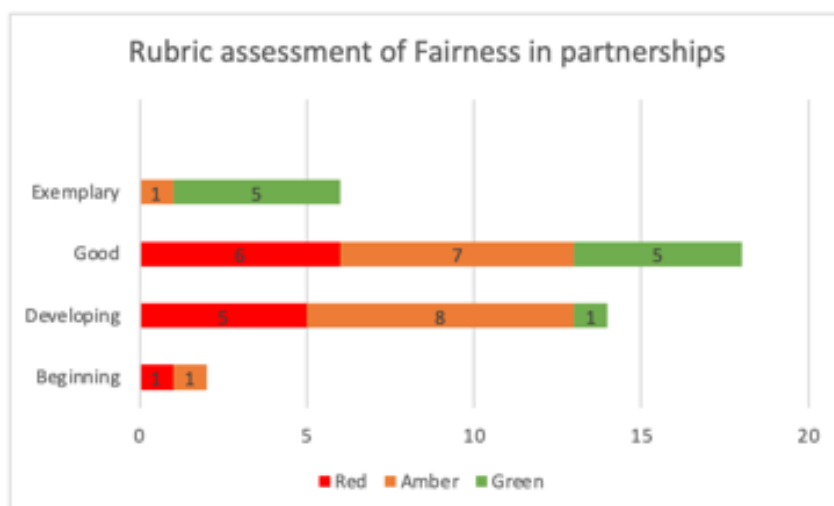Figure 3: Figure 3: Rubric assessment of Fairness in partnerships

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[76] ESPA (2018), p.1.

Rubric assessment of Fairness in partnerships

Table 6: Rating of confidence in evidence

Confidence in evidence	
Red	Poor evidence: only one source, *or* multiple sources but scant/inconsistent findings
Amber	Moderate evidence: 2 sources, *or* 3+ sources but no Southern representation, *and* generally robust and consistent findings
Green	Good evidence: 3+ sources, including Southern representation, *and* robust and consistent findings

We organise our findings emerging from the sample analysis around the three dimensions of fairness articulated in the RFI framework – namely, *fairness of opportunity* (before research), *fairness of process* (during research) and *fair distribution of benefits* (after research).

Fairness of opportunity

Most partnerships emerge out of previous collaborations and personal connections. Out of 48 awards examined, 34 (over 80%) said that partnerships had been developed from existing relations. This was the case for almost every smaller grant, while there was more variation in larger grants (such as the Interdisciplinary Hubs). Several award holders spoke about how the collaborations had developed into friendships. In some cases, this strong emphasis on personal relations seemed to have led to underestimating the need for more formal systems and processes (e.g. one PI affirmed that there was no need for formal mechanisms of conflict resolution as the relations among team members were so open and friendly).

Compressed timelines in the proposal writing and design stages significantly curtail fairness of opportunities. The tight time frame of the most funding schemes was identified as a key challenge in the Rethinking Research Collaborative report,[2] and this was confirmed by several interviewed award holders.[77] It was noted that such compressed timelines, along with the lack of notice of calls, negatively affected the possibility of bringing in new partners and the involvement of partners in project design. Several interviewees said that had the partners not known each other beforehand, it would have been impossible to submit the bid. Even in cases when the initial idea was coming from partners in the global South, the actual writing of the bid was done by Northern partners, as they were generally more familiar with the process and

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[77] 11 projects reported short time frame of application as a problem.

could get it done faster. Relatedly, the expectation (for most, albeit not all, funding calls) that award holders start producing research right away (as opposed to having a dedicated 'co-design' and partnership-building phase) limits the time that can be dedicated to working out the specifics of different partners' roles and responsibilities, and building relations of trust.

Fairness of process

Administrative requirements set up by funders and Northern partners are seen as a barrier by many Southern partners.[78] The main challenges had to do with UK due diligence requirements, which often had a knock-on effect in terms of project and funding delays. For instance, in several cases due diligence created delays to forming partnership agreements, which meant that Southern partners could not get paid (even when care had been taken to do pre-financing, i.e. in Water Hub & Ocean Hub). In some instances, due diligence also excluded some community-level organisations that would otherwise have been involved as partners. An informant from BEIS noted that in some cases, researchers based in smaller research institutions were involved as consultants rather than Co-Is, as a way to circumvent institutional due diligence requirements. Burdensome reporting processes were also noted as a challenge by both Northern and Southern partners.

Insufficient administrative capacity to deal with the specifics of GCRF awards is a challenge for both Northern and Southern universities. It is frequently remarked that most Southern universities lack dedicated research support functions and generally have low administrative capacity to deal with the complexity of GCRF grants. Our interviews unveiled that Northern universities also face challenges in this regard, as research support offices may not be well versed with the specifics of ODA-funded research. One example was given of a large UK university where the challenge of applying General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) requirements to their interaction with Southern partners led to bottlenecks and delays.

The picture of partnership agreement is very diverse in terms of contents as well as the degree to which these agreements influence the day-to-day running of the partnerships (see Box 14). Even when such agreements are in place, they are often seen as the domain of the administrative staff, and academics are at times unfamiliar with their specific provisions.

Financial challenges were frequently reported by award holders.[79] The centrality of financial issues for fairness was emphasised by both DPs and research teams. Southern partners are refunded at 100% of full economic cost (as opposed to 80% of full economic cost for Northern partners). While this is undoubtedly important, it leaves open the question of payment being made in arrears – a practice that poses enormous cashflow challenges for institutions that do not have the capacity to upfront costs.[80] In some cases (five in our sample), Northern partners were able to facilitate pre-financing but noted that this was challenging and created extra reporting burdens. Some Northern partners noted that their ability to pre-finance is limited, still leaving a gap for Southern partners to fill. Pre-financing was also held up by due diligence delays, as funds could not be disbursed without the partnership agreement being approved. Some Northern leads seemed unaware of the burden that payment in arrears posed for their Southern partners. The inability to charge 'per diems' – a common practice in many countries in the global South – was cited in a few cases as a source of tensions. Budget delays were common, both from due diligence hold-ups referenced above and due to Covid-19 (see section 3.4.3 below). In a few cases, Southern partners felt that the budget was not split equitably and they were not adequately compensated for their time.

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[78] 15 projects identified administrative challenges as a barrier.

[79] 20 projects explicitly mentioned financial challenges.

[80] Six projects explicitly mentioned payment in arrears as a barrier.

Fair distribution of benefits

> **Box 18.** **Box 14 – Analysis of partnership agreements**
>
> Twelve projects in our sample provided partnership documentation to review. During interviews, several other projects noted that they had partnership documentation in place but could not share it for confidentiality reasons.
>
> Of the documentation provided, nine agreements included financial arrangements between partners, and the methods of finance varied (e.g. five of the partners were financed quarterly in arrears, two were pre-financed by the lead partner, and two had a mix in which the Northern partners were financed quarterly in arrears and the Southern partners were pre-financed). Four of the partnership agreements had considerations of fairness or equity in their financial clauses, including equitable budget allocation and flexibility for per diems or other arrangements.
>
> In terms of positive partnership principles, nine of the projects had either moderate or good partnership principles in their agreement. These included equitable governance structures, time and funding set aside for partnership development, specific language around collective collaboration, and co-authorship of journal articles or project outputs. Two projects had a specific publication policy related to co-authorship, and two projects also had a separate communications plan between partners. Ten projects had either moderate or good IP and data ownership arrangements, with reference to shared ownership of data. However, only one agreement had a specific open-source data clause. 11 of the 12 agreements provided a mechanism for dispute resolution.

In most cases, as the awards in the sample are still under way it is premature to assess the extent to which they have actually provided benefits to partners. A number of expected benefits were discussed in the interviews: capacity strengthening, co-authoring of publications, stronger networks and greater ability to apply for funding in the future.

Capacity strengthening appears to be approached mostly in an ad hoc fashion by GCRF awards. By design, GCRF is expected to 'strengthen capacity for research, innovation and knowledge exchange in the UK and developing countries through partnership with excellent UK research and researchers'.[81] In other words, increased capacity is expected to result from partnerships as a benefit for both Northern and Southern partners. As discussed above, the lack of a systematic approach to capacity building in GCRF was a key criticism advanced by the ICAI review.[82] Our analysis confirms that capacity strengthening is still approached in a rather ad hoc fashion (through discrete activities such as training workshops), and capacity is generally understood as going from the North to the South – although there are exceptions on both these counts. A senior Southern academic also remarked that a significant limit to capacity strengthening is that fact that GCRF does not fund doctoral fellowships in the global South.

Publications which include an author from the global South are still limited; however, co-authorship does not appear to be a significant benefit of partnership for Southern researchers. Given the importance that publishing in peer review journals has for Northern researchers, it is often assumed in R4D that co-authored publications are a key benefit of partnerships, or even a proxy for partnerships' equity. This assumption is problematic in general, as it does not account for different priorities and incentive systems, and does not seem to apply to GCRF in particular. Based on a large cross-section of 1,318 GCRF publications, the analysis shows that over half of the publications do not have a Southern co-author. The analysis also confirms the general point (discussed above in section 3.4.1) of density (a limited number of institutions are over-represented in GCRF publications) and spread (a high number of institutions have co-authored at least one GCRF publication). In particular:

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[81] GCRF Strategy Document from https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/UKRI-15102020-global-challenges-research-fund-gcrf-strategy.pdf

[82] ICAI (2017).

- Taken together, institutions in five middle-income countries (Kenya, South Africa, China, Brazil and India) account for 42% of GCRF publications co-authored by GCRF partners.
- Within these countries, a limited number of large, well-established institutions take the largest share of publications. The top five co-authoring institutions are in Kenya (the Kenya Medical Research Institute and the International Livestock Research Institute) and South Africa (the University of Cape Town, the University of the Witwatersrand and Stellenbosch University).
- Overall, over 900 Southern institutions have been involved in co-authoring GCRF publications. Of those, over half only have one co-authored publication. Within this large 'spread', co-authoring institutions include government bodies, NGOs, international organisations and the private sector.
- In terms of disciplines, medical sciences are predominant in GCRF publications co-authored by researchers in the global South. Ministries of Health have co-authored GCRF publications in Uganda (17), Kenya (15), Malawi (12), Eswatini (7), Brazil (5), Indonesia (5), Thailand (5), Tanzania (4), Peru (3), Sri Lanka (3), India (2), Zimbabwe (2), DR Congo (1); Bhutan (1), El Salvador (1) and Zambia (1).

Table 7: Top five Southern institutions by number of GCRF publications

Country	Institution	# of co-authored publications
Kenya	Kenya Medical Research Institute	144
South Africa	University of Cape Town	108
South Africa	University of the Witwatersrand	93
South Africa	Stellenbosch University	68
Kenya	International Livestock Research Institute	62

Figure 4: Figure 4: Variance in number of GCRF publications per Southern institution
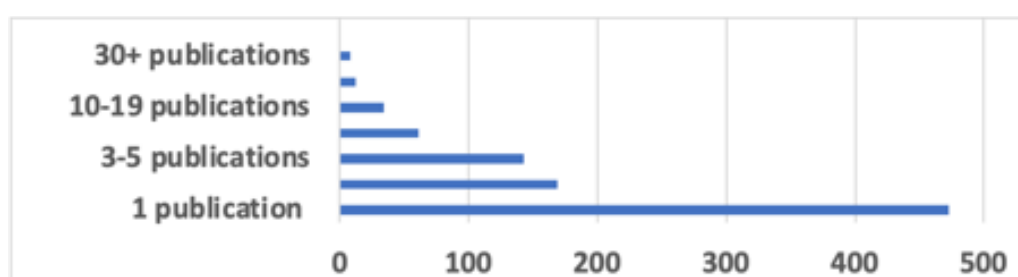
Box 19.   Box 15 – Fairness in large GCRF investment: the case of Interdisciplinary Research Hubs

The GCRF Interdisciplinary Research Hubs to address intractable challenges faced by developing countries are large-scale investments – ranging from £13 million to £20 million each over a period of five years – that aim at bringing together researchers, governments, international agencies, NGOs and community groups in developing countries and the UK to address the intractable development challenges which have proved resistant to change in the past and cannot be solved by one single organisation, discipline or country alone. Twelve Hubs have been funded, starting in 2019. Together, the Hubs include 400 unique partner organisations in 85 countries and 550 researchers from a range of disciplines addressing 16 of the UN SDGs.

The Interdisciplinary Hubs offer examples of more complex partnerships where issues of fairness and equity have been thought about in more depth and detail. The fairness sample contained four Interdisciplinary Hubs (i.e. one-third of the total number of funded Hubs in GCRF), namely the ARISE Hub,[83] the One Ocean Hub,[84] the One Health Poultry Hub[85] and the Water Security & Sustainable Development Hub.[86] These Hubs all demonstrated considerations of fairness and equity, which were significantly above average, throughout each stage of the project. In particular:

- *Fairness of opportunity:* During the project development and proposal writing phase, each Hub held a **multi-day in-person workshop dedicated to proposal writing and partnership development** that included representatives from each partner organisation. This allowed Southern partners to help shape the proposal, and also provided time for partners to get to know each other. Roles of partners were often left flexible or defined from the bottom up in acknowledgement of the importance of local context. This decentralisation of the process has proved crucial. There was also an opportunity to develop expectations for the partnership through collaboration documents or a Code of Conduct. These are reviewed throughout the projects to ensure compliance and to update as needed. In several Hubs, representatives from partner organisations also attended the interview for the grant.

- *Fairness of process:* **Equitable governance structures** were considered a key component of fairness. In each Hub, there are **regular meetings** of an executive team or committee that includes representatives from each partner and, in some cases, a rotating chair to ensure each Co-I has the opportunity to lead the discussion. These governance structures and partnership expectations are formalised through **partnership agreements**, which also include methods for dispute resolution and consideration to intellectual property and data ownership. Feedback from partners is collected both informally through regular meetings and through **feedback forms and surveys**, which usually occur once a year. Changes such as a rotating chair (ARISE Hub) or greater management decentralisation (One Ocean Hub) have been implemented as a result of these surveys. Across the Hubs there has been an effort to

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[83] The GCRF Accountability for Informal Urban Equity (ARISE) Hub, led by Professor Sally Theobald at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, aims at catalysing change in approaches to enhancing accountability and improving the health and well-being of poor, marginalised people living in informal urban settlements, with an initial focus on Bangladesh, India, Kenya and Sierra Leone. http://www.ariseconsortium.org/

[84] The One Ocean Hub, led by Professor Elisa Morgera at the University of Strathclyde, aims at transforming responses on dealing with urgent challenges facing the ocean, by integrating law and arts, policy, informatics, education, history, anthropology and philosophy to provide targeted advice on coherent and flexible, pro-poor and gender-sensitive, climate-proofed and transparent laws and policies across the areas of environmental, human rights, science and technology, trade and investment. https://www.strath.ac.uk/research/strathclydecentreenvironmentallawgovernance/oneoceanhub/

[85] The One Health Poultry Hub, led by Professor Fiona Tomley at Royal Veterinary College, studies poultry value chains in four countries at differing stages of intensification (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Vietnam) and aims to achieve a deep and generalisable understanding of production factors that increase risk to human and animal health. https://www.onehealthpoultry.org/

[86] The Water, Security and Sustainable Development Hub, led by Professor Richard Dawson at the University of Newcastle, uses a transdisciplinary approach to break down traditional siloed ways of thinking in order to address five systemic barriers to water security: insufficient data, unfit service delivery models, fragmented governance, unsuitable solutions to localised problems, and limited community involvement.

> **pre-finance partners** so as to reduce cashflow issues, although this was not without difficulty. Pre-financing has allowed Southern partners to complete project activities in a timely manner and with the proper staff and resourcing.
>
> - *Fairness of benefits:* As all of the Hubs are still ongoing, equitable and fair benefits cannot yet fully be seen, but there is ongoing work supporting benefits throughout the projects. **Capacity strengthening and co-learning** with Southern partners has been a focus, with a widening of Southern partner networks. There is a strong effort to **include early career researchers** in project management, both in leadership and in publication policy. Each Hub has plans for **co-authorship** of publications, as well as presentations at events and conferences. Some of the Hubs are farther along than others in these activities, but in each case, conscious thought has been put into fairness of benefits.
>
> While the exceptional size and complexity of these investments limits the potential for replicability, there is nonetheless scope for reflection on how lessons can be applied more widely.

3.4.3 Effects of Covid-19 on GCRF awards partnerships

Covid-19 posed significant challenges for GCRF North–South partnerships, affecting all three dimensions of fairness. Most GCRF projects have been affected by Covid-19 and related containment measures; delays were reported in many cases.[87] Projects have generally been proactive in responding to these challenges, for example by moving events online and using online research tools.[88] In several cases, the lead institution decided to continue payments to Southern partners even though the research work was stalled; however, some complained that this was made more challenging by the continued uncertainties on the funders' side about the reallocation of underspent budget.[89] Other Northern interviewees reported to have taken on bits of works from the Southern partners when these were particularly affected by Covid-19 (for example in the case of one Co-I whose pre-existing health conditions made them particularly at risk for Covid complications).[90]

Alongside challenges, Covid-19 also opened the way to more equal distribution of roles and responsibilities. In most cases, Covid-related restrictions meant that Northern partners could not travel, and this translated into a greater research role for Southern partners.[91]

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[87] F1; F9; F14; F16; F17; F18; F20; F22; F23; F24; F25; F28; F29; F30; F31; F34; F40; F41; F42; F43; F49; F50; F53; F57; F59; F65; F81; F82; F83; F84; CS4; CS16; CS17; CS40; CS51; CS52; CS76; CS77; CS78; CS81; CS88; CS89; CS102.

[88] F16; F20; F23; F24; F30; F40; F41; F42; F43; F45; F65; F68; F70; F81; F82.

[89] F9; F14; F28.

[90] F63.

[91] F1; F49; F50; CS24; DP40.

Box 20. Box 16 – Responding to the Covid-19 pandemic: the case of the ARISE Hub

The ARISE Hub works to catalyse a change around accountability, health and well-being of urban marginalised people, and collaborates with partners in Kenya, Sierra Leone, Bangladesh and India. As of February 2021 the project has been running for two years, which has allowed time for substantial partnership development. When the Covid pandemic hit, there was a significant impact on the Hub. Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM), the lead organisation, issued a partnership survey to gain feedback from partners, and found that there was a need for partners to feel safe and supported during the pandemic. Specifically, partners were at the forefront of supporting communities in informal settlements experiencing negative impacts of curfews, lockdowns and – in some cases – police brutality, which impacted livelihoods, causing hunger for many. The ARISE Hub has a strong focus on safeguarding, which has been amplified during the pandemic. In light of this, and in response to its partners' needs, LSTM formed a structured approach to address the challenges from Covid-19.

1. *Share, communicate and support each other across contexts and areas of expertise*
   There was a focus on promoting awareness and communication about the virus. LSTM created a short film with a colleague to answer questions and concerns from Slum Dwellers International. An effort was made to communicate evidence-based ways to reduce transmission in an attempt to dispel myths and misinformation. The George Institute for Global Health India (TGI) crowdsourced resources appropriate to share in informal communities and aided in efforts to fundraise for these communities. The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) also developed resources around protecting informal settlements from Covid-19. These resources are published on the ARISE Hub website.

2. *Draw on pre-existing relationships and organisational strengths to add value*
   Partner organisations in each country utilised existing networks and expertise to disseminate information about Covid-19. For instance in Kenya, LCVT Health used an information hotline and SMS messages to clients to provide information. The African Population and Health Research Council (APHRC) in Kenya provided handwashing resources. Health workers in each partner country also visited marginalised people at home prior to restrictions in order to provide information on prevention in a simple way.

3. *Focus on the most vulnerable*
   ARISE partners developed strategies to reach those who can often be excluded from conventional communication. These approaches included outreach to deaf communities through a public information film, a Twitter chat to highlight needs and resources of people with disabilities, and discussions with sex worker communities around concerns with exacerbated police harassment and exploitation by clients. In conversations with these communities, there was a focus on language and avoiding terms that could have negative connotations, such as 'social distancing' in the context of caste discrimination. Livelihood support was provided through community-based organisations in the form of funding, community kitchens and relief kits. Recipients of this help included waste pickers and those that are often excluded from government social protection schemes. Partners are also offering mental health support through call centres, volunteer counsellors and resource sharing.

4. *Advocate for change*

   Hub partners have utilised various methods to advocate for marginalised people in governmental and non-governmental responses to Covid-19. For instance, partners in Kenya have built on existing governmental relationships to advocate for attention to socioeconomic vulnerabilities, and Slum Dwellers International Kenya has developed a tool to monitor cases in informal settlements in order to inform government response. Other partners have developed a mitigation and Response Strategy for informal settlements, provided technical support for evidence-based Covid-19 information, negotiated demands for personal protective equipment, and advocated for systems-level interventions to minimise the community impact of Covid-19.

5. *Provide mental health support to partners*

   LSTM also got permission from ESRC to use Hub funds for mental health support via a counsellor in Liverpool or local support as appropriate. This support was made available for anyone working at a partner organisation. This has filled a vital gap, given the little psychosocial support available to research partners in-country.

   LTSM has also supported partners to deliver this work. Due to the pandemic, LTSM could not travel to partner countries, and either fieldwork was delayed or it needed to be conducted remotely. LSTM facilitated learning across partners on remote interviews and also offered support in other capacity building or administrative needs.

Alongside challenges, Covid-19 also opened the way to more equal distribution of roles and responsibilities. In most cases, Covid-related restrictions meant that Northern partners could not travel, and this translated into a greater research role for Southern partners. It was also noted that having events such as workshops and conferences online rather than in person also meant that junior Southern researchers (who would not otherwise have had the budget to travel abroad) could be involved. One informant noted that online communication is more 'horizontal' compared to in-person communication.

3.5 How fair have GCRF awards been when engaging with stakeholders (beyond formal partners) and, in particular, local communities?

> **Box 21.**   **Summary of findings**
>
> - GCRF awards report extensive engagement with stakeholders other than formal partners, with significant variation in terms of 'who' is involved, 'how' and 'why'.
> - In-country research partners play a central role in the identification and engagement of key stakeholders.
> - The risk of raising expectations in local communities about immediate benefits from the research process, without those actually materialising, emerges as a key fairness issue.

As noted in Table 4 (section 2.2) above, our analysis with reference to this sub-EQ is necessarily less in-depth, given our inability to engage directly with in-country stakeholders to verify emerging insights. The findings presented below are therefore necessarily high-level and should be considered provisional. Nonetheless, a few observations emerge from our qualitative analysis to inform the GCRF evaluation in Stage 1b and beyond.

GCRF awards report extensive engagement with stakeholders other than formal partners, although the distinction between 'formal' and 'informal' partners can at times be blurred. The most common stakeholders involved were local and national governments, national and international NGOs and local communities – and, less frequently, the private sector.

Awards varied in terms of the breadth and depth of stakeholder engagement, ranging from minimal engagement to incorporation into each phase of the project. Echoing the findings of the relevance module, only a small number of projects engaged community-level stakeholders meaningfully at the design stage to capture needs and priorities and ensure a level of investment in the project. Others engaged stakeholders during the project implementation, with varying levels of attention paid to fairness and equity. For some there was a conscious effort not to be extractive, and several projects created communication and engagement plans. For others, engagement was reported critical to the project success but there was no evidence of attention being paid to fairness issues. Several projects noted purposive engagement with specific sections of the local community, such as disadvantaged youth, women or elderly populations – though, again, mirroring the relevance module, this tended to be for the narrow purpose of collecting data or as an audience for findings.

Pre-existing connections and networks were crucial to stakeholder engagement and relied upon for participation and buy-in, and the role of in-country formal partners was central to stakeholder engagement. Southern partners typically used their own existing networks, which created a level of trust that may not have been afforded to the Northern partner(s) alone.[92]

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[92] F45; F56; F68; F70.

The most common forms of activities were workshops and other knowledge exchange events.[93] Several projects noted the benefit of having a plurality of voices at these workshops, which impacted on the fair sharing of benefits and relevance of research. By bringing together policymakers, NGOs, community members and others, different perspectives could be shared, and in-country networks could also be facilitated between stakeholders. Also, an effort was often made to engage communities in culturally appropriate and sensitive ways. In a few cases it was reported that efforts were made to have translators to/from the local language to facilitate wider participation.

Political constraints emerged as challenges for stakeholder engagement in several cases. In some countries, political elections meant policymaker engagement was too difficult, and in others policymakers wanted to influence the nature of the project.

The Covid-19 pandemic created challenges in stakeholder engagement by delaying planned events or forcing them online. This created barriers for discussions with communities with no or little access to technology, as it was harder to engage remotely. However, in some projects the Southern partner was still able to creatively engage with these communities.

Managing expectations presented challenges when dealing with local communities. Researchers had to navigate data collection without promising immediate change, which often proved difficult. There was also often a lack of time and resources to properly engage stakeholders, and there was an issue of properly compensating stakeholders for their time. Some projects hosted workshops in the global North without resources available for Southern stakeholders to join. However, issues such as this were largely mitigated by Covid, with the migration of all conferences and workshops to online format. A small number of projects noted that this actually increased stakeholder engagement, as it eliminated the need for travel.

We saw no evidence of any substantive reflection having been done across GCRF on what 'fairness' means when engaging with non-formal partners – including the risk of research projects 'doing harm' by, for example, displacing local priorities or placing undue burden in terms of time commitments on national or local stakeholders, or creating unrealistic expectations for immediate benefits in local communities. While awareness of these tensions may exist at the level of individual research teams in some instances, these do not appear to be systematically escalated at the strategic level.

3.6   Interlinkages with other modules

A number of the cross-cutting issues arising in our Fairness assessment clearly resonate strongly with the findings of the **management** module, namely: a need for better incorporation of development outcomes alongside research excellence in decision-making processes to enhance the distributional fairness of funding; and the potential value of increased Southern participation in those decision-making processes in helping to deliver this credibly. The fairness assessment also found that 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 – which suggests there is strong potential to enhance fairness practice across the board where solutions that have been proven to be effective are showcased with a view to replication.

Analysis of DPs and programmes by the management module suggested the focus relating to equity is primarily on the extent to which the GCRF empowers research partners in the global South. However, the fairness assessment concluded that capacity strengthening appears to be

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[93] F1; F3; F18; F20; F22; F25; F46; F49; F50; F51.

approached mostly in an ad hoc fashion by GCRF awards. This is certainly an issue that the GCRF evaluation will need to reflect on more deeply in Stage 1b and beyond.

Similarly, both the fairness and **relevance and coherence** modules found that research projects are typically shaped by personal connections and pre-existing partnerships in focal countries or regions (rather than formal scoping processes), which means that relevance is often being defined by specific groups of people in specific ways – and the fairness (or lack thereof) embedded at this highest level has consequences along the whole pathway to impact.

First, the way that Northern leads engage with Southern partners – and the extent to which they 'allow' them (as the party with which more power resides as the lead applicant) to shape the research proposal and delivery processes – either amplifies or weakens relevance. Further, since formal academic partners are often the entry point for wider engagement in-country with broader stakeholder groups, fairness conditions between Northern and Southern formal partners – as well as the value that Southern partners place on equitable relationships with other in-country parties in wider terms – can cascade down to compound positive or negative outcomes. As acknowledged in the relevance and coherence module report, research teams frequently deliver workshops, conferences and other events, but our line of sight on who is in the room, what was being presented/discussed and how the inevitable asymmetries of power were handled has been limited in Stage 1a of this evaluation.

Box 17 illustrates the influence partner selection has on relevance through the role that fairness and power dynamics play in enabling or constraining Southern partner influence on project design and delivery.

> ### Box 17 – The gendered price of precarity: workplace sexual harassment and young women's agency
>
> Funded via the British Academy's Youth Futures call, this GCRF project aims to contribute to promoting gender equality, especially by preventing workplace gender-based violence faced by young women working in formal agro-processing firms and informal jobs in urban Bangladesh and Uganda. Partnership between the IDS-based PI and Co-Is seems to be strong, genuine and generally equitable – which is attributed partly to the PI's own way of working, but also to IDS's wider institutional reputation, systems and approach. The project drew on existing relationships between partners and stakeholders, and formalised partnership principles were drafted in the proposal to ensure equitable collaboration and communication. The three Co-Is interviewed expressed a strong sense of autonomy and an ability to drive the project from their end, with trust built up between partners from previous collaboration. This is important because the lead partner organisation in each country (Makerere University in Uganda and BIGD in Bangladesh) are leading on almost all stakeholder engagement, leveraging their own extensive networks including NGOs, CSOs and government authorities.
>
> The qualitative approach adopted in this project pays specific attention to everyday language on workplace sexual harassment and the role of social-cultural norms, using cooperative inquiry with youth researchers involved in Youth Research teams in both countries, to ensure young people's central involvement in the study and the inclusion of their perspectives on solutions. During the proposal development stage, the Southern partners suggested the inclusion of 'Safety Audits' and 'Body Mapping' methods and recommended civil society partners who nominated youth researchers in each country. The youth representatives are seen as 'target groups reps, partners and a sounding board all rolled into one' and the management team try to empower and include the youth representatives wherever possible. This includes them choosing the specific research questions to focus on in that country setting, conducting research of their own supported by Co-Is, and playing a key role in relation to stakeholder engagement towards the end of the project. In this way, this project highlights how equitable partnership with formal academic partners led to more meaningful engagement with local communities/potential beneficiaries, all of which might

> reasonably be expected to enhance the beneficiary-level relevance and inclusivity of the findings produced.

It is clear that the selection of the 'right' partners and the creation of a relationship within which they feel able to shape the project is often fundamental in ensuring that the project is relevant at the local or national level – and, relatedly, speaks meaningfully to the interests of poor or marginalised groups, which is where we also see a strong connection to the GESIP module. In this way, fairness considerations can be seen to cut across partner selection and the ways in which these partners (a) interpret target groups' needs at the local, regional or national level, and (b) are able to shape project design and delivery in an effective way. This fundamentally dictates the degree to which the project as a whole is able to maximise positive outcomes for ODA target populations and minimise harm, both at the level of the partnership/research ecosystem and among local communities.

4 Conclusions

This section draws conclusions against the evaluation questions considered in this module, and offers six key recommendations.

In setting the context for this review, we recognise that research fairness is a broad and still vaguely defined notion. The idea that research should be 'fair' is widely supported; yet what exactly fairness means in relation to various categories (researchers, research participants, research users and others who may come into contact with the process at various points) remains open to debate. While these questions apply, to some degree, to all types of research, they carry particular urgency in ODA-funded R4D: achieving impact in this type of research is strongly predicated upon collaborative processes but, at the same time, these processes are embedded in structural systems and dynamics of inequality.

For the purposes of our analysis, we defined research fairness as **a way of designing, conducting and evaluating research that takes into consideration the potential effects (positive and/or negative) of the research on all those involved (as partners, participants, users and beneficiaries), as well as the broader impact on the context where the research takes place**. Some aspects of this definition – particularly 'equitable research partnerships' – have received widespread policy attention in recent years, while others remain relatively underexplored or have attracted only specialised interest. We posit that GCRF – as an ODA-funded R4D investment of unprecedented scope and ambition in the UK – should advance, and be evaluated against, this notion of 'fairness writ large' rather than only its individual components.

Our analytical framework identifies three layers of fairness:

1   The first concerns *fairness among research partners*. This layer has received considerable attention in GCRF, and our findings show signs of progress and a considerable learning curve across DPs, although challenges remain.

2   The second concerns *fairness in interaction with stakeholders, local communities, and others that come in contact with the research process in various capacities.* In this regard we found that progress has been considerably less systematic, albeit some promising initiatives have taken place (e.g. the reflection on conducting research with Indigenous communities, led by AHRC and ESRC).

3   We refer to the third layer as *contextual fairness* – shifts the attention to the aggregate, medium- to long-term impact of GCRF on research ecosystems in the global South. Such impact is not merely a function on how 'fair' individual partnership and engagement are, but also depends on broader questions around who sets the priorities for research, whose knowledge is empowered, who can have a voice in international networks and collaborations, and what are the systems, processes and values that determine inclusion (and, inevitably, exclusion) from funding opportunities. We found that while challenges related to contextual fairness are recognised by DPs and research teams alike, GCRF currently lacks a coherent strategy at this level.

By design, GCRF involves a lot of UK academics who have not worked 'in development' before, and are therefore new to the challenges of North–South partnerships and engagement with stakeholders and communities. This high influx of newcomers opens opportunities but also poses risks, and calls for an explicit 'do no harm' lens to be incorporated in GCRF investments.

Based on the above considerations, we summarise the main findings for each of the sub-EQs.

To what extent have considerations of fairness been reflected in GCRF strategy, agenda-setting, vision of impact and decision-making structures?

Fairness considerations in GCRF have mostly been limited to the promotion of equitable partnerships. The 2017 GCRF strategy includes a focus on equitable North–South partnerships as a cornerstone of the Fund, and this centrality was reiterated in our consultation with BEIS and DPs. Such partnerships are seen as having an instrumental value to deliver research with development impact, as well as a strong capacity-building value for both UK and Southern academics. We remark on an unresolved tension between these two rationales for partnerships, which reverberates at various levels in our findings.

GCRF as a whole has undergone a significant learning curve since the start of the Fund, and UKRI has taken a lead role in the effort to increase the fairness, equity and representativeness of GCRF partnerships, delivering a number of initiatives that were consistently mentioned by DPs as milestones in this process. Our findings confirm the observation, made in similar terms by various DP informants, that GCRF has come a long way since its early days in terms of clarity and consistency in its thinking about partnerships, although considerable challenges remain.

Other aspects of fairness have received less systematic attention. There is a growing recognition of the need for the safeguarding of research participants and non-participants who are affected by the research process in various ways, as well as some focused reflections on specific aspects of community engagement.

Opportunities for Southern voices to shape GCRF strategy, set the agenda and make decisions remain very limited. While questions of contextual fairness are acknowledged by DP stakeholders – particularly the risks of privileging a limited number of well-established institutions in the global South – these issues remain peripherical to current agenda-setting and planning for the GCRF investments.

To what extent have considerations related to fairness of partnerships and engagement informed GCRF funding decisions?

Equitable partnerships in relation to the funding process is one of the areas where fairness issues have advanced most significantly across GCRF. The focus on equitable partnerships in GCRF calls is stronger now compared to the early days of the Fund, but there is significant variance among calls, and involvement appears stronger 'downstream'.

There is limited evidence of Southern perspectives being incorporated in the 'upstream' prioritisation of areas for GCRF funding and design of funding calls as a whole, although there are discrete examples of good practice (for example the Applied Global Health Research Board established by the Medical Research Council).

Involvement of Southern representation and perspectives in the selection process has increased significantly since the start of GCRF, with most DPs now incorporating Southern perspectives in the review and selection of awards. A good degree of consideration is now given to fairness issues in the selection process in the form of clearer language in funding call documentation, more explicit requirements, and clearer guidance given to peer reviewers and assessment panels – although the emphasis and level of detail again vary widely across calls.

A number of GCRF funding calls have been opened to Southern lead applicants. This is an important step, since limiting applicants to UK PIs was widely acknowledged as a key obstacle to fairness and equity in GCRF. Similarly, several funding calls have been launched with a specific focus on partnership development, which should (over time) help to create the time and space necessary for partners to build more equitable relationships.

The GCRF community has taken major steps towards equitable partnerships in relation to funding decisions, but there remains a risk that the still relatively small number of appointments (e.g. on selection panels) and Southern-led awards accrue to a small pool of individuals and institutions that are already well established and well resourced. Incorporating more (and more diverse) Southern perspectives in the 'upstream' process of identification of GCRF funding priorities would serve as an important point of reflection, as well as a check and balance, in relation to the impact GCRF has on the research ecosystem and market in the global South.

How effectively have issues related to fairness been addressed in programme-level partnerships between DPs and regional institutions in the global South?

The establishment of strategic partnerships between GCRF DPs and institutions in the global South represents a key aspect of GCRF commitment to strengthening equitable partnerships and Southern involvement, as demonstrated by our analysis of two prominent examples of such partnerships: the partnership between UKRI and ARUA and the partnership between the Royal Society and AAS for FLAIR.

Both of the programme partnerships reviewed appear to have worked well, with Northern and Southern lead partners expressing satisfaction with the collaboration. The creation of these programme-level partnerships is acknowledged as a significant step forward in GCRF thinking about Southern engagement, and there are indications that this type of equitable engagement with well-established, well-respected pan-African institutions could potentially play a bridging role to bring a broader variety of institutions (in terms of size and type) into the GCRF sphere. A clear example of this is given by the hub-and-spoke model adopted by the ARUA Centres of Excellence, by which 'stronger' universities function to strengthen the capacity of 'weaker' ones. However, this is not a given, particularly if fundamental issues are not addressed.

In different ways, both programme-level partnerships exemplify the underlying tension – embedded in GCRF strategy – between, on the one hand, partnerships as a means to deliver excellent, relevant and impactful research, and, on the other, partnerships as a way of building long-term capacity of researchers and institutions. While in principle the two rationales are not mutually exclusive – and GCRF as a whole *could* do both – the tension between 'research excellence' and 'capacity building' does emerge when designing and funding specific investments.

The way in which these tensions are navigated inevitably affects who is included in – and, by implication, excluded from – GCRF-funded opportunities and networks. These issues are fundamental to the GCRF model and must be reflected upon and revisited at regular intervals to ensure that the maximum value is added to research ecosystems at the local, national and continental levels.

What do GCRF award-level partnerships look like in practice and how fair are the partnerships in relation to opportunities, process and sharing of benefits?

GCRF awards vary greatly in terms of numbers and roles of Southern researchers involved, as well as the attention given to equity and fairness in partnerships. The distribution of partnerships shows both 'depth' (a small number of countries and institutions with a high number of GCRF award partnerships) and 'spread' (a large number of countries and institutions with low-level GCRF engagement). This means that within the Fund, there currently exists an over-reliance on formal research partnerships with a relatively small number of elite institutions in middle-income countries – along with the potential of reaching out to a higher number of smaller institutions.

The high density of partnerships partly reflects the tendency of UK researchers to go for 'tried and true' partners, and most partnerships emerge out of previous collaborations and personal connections. Compressed timelines in the proposal writing and design stages significantly curtail the possibility to establish new partnerships and the role that Southern partners play in research design.

Awards in our sample generally appear to have given consideration to fairness. While available evidence is not sufficiently robust to make strong quantitative claims, qualitative analysis shows that many GCRF awards are based on well-functioning and mutually beneficial collaborations. The strongest examples of good practice tend to be the larger investments funded by UKRI (particularly the Hubs, which are atypical in terms of scale and process) and awards belonging to institutions/researchers who have delivered R4D work for other donors (particularly DFID/FCDO) in the past.

Administrative and financial requirements are widely perceived as presenting significant challenges to fair process, including the need to accept payment in arrears in most cases, which constitutes a real burden for Southern partners. UK due diligence requirements were also challenging and often had a knock-on effect in terms of project delays.

To date, capacity strengthening appears to be approached mostly in an ad hoc fashion by GCRF projects, and is generally understood as flowing from the North to the South – despite GCRF strategy documentation stating that it should be considered a two-way process.

We found interesting evidence that Covid-19, while creating challenges for projects, had the effect of giving more responsibility to Southern researchers to take on leading roles in the partnership. The impact of Covid-19 on fairness of partnerships is flagged as a topic for further analysis.

How fair have GCRF projects been when engaging with stakeholders (beyond formal partners) and, in particular, local communities?

GCRF awards report extensive engagement with stakeholders other than formal partners, although the distinction between 'formal' and 'informal' partners can at times be blurred. The most common stakeholders involved were local and national governments, national and international NGOs, and local communities – and, less frequently, the private sector. This diversity, combined with the limitations of time and resources of the evaluation, has not allowed for an in-depth analysis of fairness issues for this wider group. We were particularly wary about drawing conclusions on fairness of engagement based solely on the perspectives of researchers. Nonetheless, a few observations emerge from our qualitative analysis.

Awards varied in terms of the breadth and depth of stakeholder engagement, ranging from minimal engagement to incorporation into each phase of the project. Pre-existing connections and networks were crucial to stakeholder engagement and relied upon for participation and buy-in, and the role of in-country formal partners was central to stakeholder engagement. Southern partners typically used their own existing networks, which created a level of trust that may not have been afforded to the Northern partner(s) alone.

Our analysis suggests that little thinking has been done within GCRF on what 'fairness' means when engaging with non-formal partners – including the risk of research projects 'doing harm' by, for example, displacing local priorities or placing undue burden in terms of time commitments on national or local stakeholders, or creating unrealistic expectations for immediate benefits in local communities. While awareness of these tensions may exist at the level of individual research teams in some instances, these do not appear to be systematically escalated at the strategic level.

In terms of **linkages to other modules**, a number of the cross-cutting issues arising in our fairness assessment clearly resonate strongly with the findings of the other modules. In particular, our analysis demonstrates that the approach adopted and outcomes achieved in relation to fairness are closely related to those adopted and achieved in relation to relevance and GESIP – because the selection of the 'right' partners and the creation of a relationship within which they feel able to shape the project is typically fundamental in ensuring that the project is relevant at the local or national level and, relatedly, speaks meaningfully to the interests of poor or marginalised groups. In this way, fairness can be seen to underpin the whole Theory of Change for the GCRF investment and the importance of maximising equity at each level of the delivery chain is brought into sharper focus.

4.1   Recommendations

The overarching recommendation emerging from the Fairness review is for GCRF to keep a focus on 'fairness writ large'. While promoting equitable partnerships is essential and should remain a priority, it is important that other dimensions of fairness are not overlooked: GCRF as a whole carries a great potential to positively influence research ecosystems in the global South but, by the same token, also an inherent risk of 'doing harm' – a risk that persists even if most of its funded partnerships meet standards of equity and fairness.

The following more specific recommendations are made based on the findings from this review:

1. **Strengthen Southern voices and perspectives to inform GCRF governance and decision making.** Increasing the level and the diversity of Southern involvement at the strategic level should be prioritised to deepen and broaden the conversation on fairness issues to maximise impact for the GCRF investment as a whole. This matters centrally – i.e. through increased representation on the GCRF Strategic Advisory Group – and at the devolved DP level, where a minimum level of representation could be mandated to ensure that Southern perspectives shape investment priorities.

2. **Improve consistency across DPs and create minimum standards for 'fairness writ large' across the GCRF portfolio.** An important dimension of this is the need to explicitly recognise the tensions that emerge in the commissioning process between, on the one hand, 'research excellence', as conventionally measured in academia, and, on the other hand, 'capacity building' and engagement of less-established institutions. This is a fundamental conceptual tension in GCRF, which defies purely technical solutions.

3. **Address a number of well-recognised obstacles to the engagement of Southern researchers and institutions, in a way that is consistent across DPs.** A number of issues have been brought up consistently in this review as inhibiting Southern participation, and addressing them consistently across DPs would significantly contribute to fairness across the Fund. These include:
   - Longer call timelines and the use of pre-call announcements and/or multi-stage proposal processes.
   - A GCRF-wide review of due diligence requirements and payment terms – identifying viable ways of working that minimise the burden/obstacles for Southern partners.
   - Investment in activities and resources to enhance the capacity of UK and LMIC-based administrators to manage ODA grants and engage with one another constructively.

4. **Provide guidance on how fairness over the lifetime of awards can be more systematically measured and reported.** Beyond flagship programmes – which have more stringent monitoring and reporting requirements – most awards are not required to report in any detail on how they have ensured fairness, either at the proposal stage, during delivery or upon closure. Award holders should be encouraged to document the ways in which the

project promoted fairness and equity in partnerships, and the results of these approaches, i.e. the benefits that flowed from Southern partners having shaped research design and implementation.

5. **Creating GCRF-wide guidance and/or case studies to demonstrate the importance of fairness principles, showcase best practice and inspire research teams to reach for ODA excellence in relation to fairness** – to guide new applicants in future calls and improve practice among the existing grantee cohort**.** One area where guidance would be particularly useful is on the imperative to 'do no harm' with regards to stakeholder engagement – including direct concerns such as safeguarding, but also reflecting on the potential to 'do harm' indirectly, for example where local priorities are displaced by externally imposed agendas.

6. **Develop a clear framework for capacity building and plan for clearly delineating/prioritising this type of activity.** Developing a clearer framework for capacity enhancement and plan for clearly delineating/prioritising this type of work (through criteria and scoring systems) would help to draw in a more diverse range of formal Southern partners. Importantly, this will help GCRF commissioners and applicants to more effectively negotiate possible trade-offs between research excellence, capacity enhancement and impact.

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