Final Report

Global Challenges Research Fund Evaluation
Module: Relevance and Coherence

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Acronyms and abbreviations

BEIS	Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
Co-I	Co-Investigator
DFID	Department for International Development (former)
DP	Delivery Partner
DSH	Deliberate Self-Harm
EEEP	Enriching Engineering Education Programme
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
FCO	Foreign & Commonwealth Office
FLAIR	Future Leaders African Independent Research
GCRF	Global Challenges Research Fund
GESIP	Gender Equality, Social Inclusion and Poverty (Alleviation)
GROW	Growing Research Capacity
GtR	Gateway to Research
HMG	Her Majesty's Government
ICAI	Independent Commission for Aid Impact
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
INI	International Nitrogen Initiative
INMS	International Nitrogen Management System
IPP	International Partnership Programme
KPI	Key performance Indicator
LMIC	Lower and Middle-Income Country
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MEQ	Main Evaluation Question
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD/DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development/ Development Assistance Committee
PI	Principal Investigator
R&D	Research and Development
R&I	Research and Innovation
RQ+	Research Quality+
SACEP	South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme
SANC	South Asian Nitrogen Centre
SASHI	South Asia Self-Harm Research Capacity Building Initiative
SCOR	Strategic Coherence of ODA-funded Research
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
ToC	Theory of Change
UK	United Kingdom
UKCDR	UK Collaborative on Development Research

UKRI	UK Research and Innovation
UKSA	UK Space Agency
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme

Executive summary

The GCRF Relevance and Coherence Assessment aims to assess whether GCRF is funding the 'right things', and whether it is coherent with other initiatives addressing global, regional and national challenges.

The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) is a £1.5 billion fund announced by the United Kingdom (UK) government in late 2015 to support pioneering 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 R&I 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 position the Fund to deliver on its intended aims and commitments.

This report sets out the findings of one of those four modules – the Relevance and Coherence review. It focuses on the relevance and coherence of GCRF to both 'global' policies and programmes and also to regional, national and subnational needs and priorities in selected geographical areas. These questions are important, as relevance and coherence help position research for impact, as depicted in the GCRF Theory of Change (ToC). We investigated five large global programmes to understand how programmes have considered relevance and coherence in their design and implementation. We also considered a sample of 26 awards across five countries and two regions to assess relevance and coherence to regional, national and subnational priorities, policies and initiatives against a set of standardised rubrics and independent contextual analysis. Our primary methods included desk reviews of around 250 documents, and semi-structured interviews with 13 BEIS, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and DP stakeholders (portfolio level), 20 DP and award-level stakeholders (programme level), and 55 principal investigators (PIs), co-investigators (Co-Is) and award partners (award level).

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

Relevance: To what extent and why is GCRF and its components consistent with and responsive to target groups' needs, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) priorities and partners' and funders'/donors' policies (global, regional, national and subnational)? In essence, is GCRF funding the right things?

Overall, the evidence suggests that GCRF is largely succeeding in funding relevant research that responds to development needs and priorities, although some important gaps remain.

- At the **portfolio level**, the establishment of challenge portfolios and Challenge Leaders has improved relevance through bringing projects together under a common framing and introducing more strategic focus on high-level priorities. However, these initiatives are still largely UKRI-focused, and detailed decision making on the shape of portfolios is still very much devolved to UKRI and DPs. While SDGs are widely used and understood across the portfolio, topic modelling suggests that the links between thematic areas of focus, Challenge Areas and SDGs can be ambiguous and sometimes arbitrary, making it difficult to make meaningful judgements on the

overall thematic shape of the GCRF portfolio and the relevance of the Fund to addressing specific challenges.

- At the **programme level**, proposal processes and funding criteria are crucial mechanisms for ensuring relevance. Call documents ensure a focus on ODA compliance and SDGs, and panel processes and interviews consider how research will respond to local contexts. Lower and middle-income country (LMIC) representation on panels has improved in recent years, although the broad geographical scope of GCRF poses challenges to ensuring that panels incorporate expertise from all areas targeted by grantees. Although proposal processes are strong, ensuring relevance is maintained through the lifespan of an award has been a major challenge, with monitoring and reporting requirements often providing limited insights. There are some notable exceptions within large-scale programmes, which have often taken a more systematic approach to ensuring relevance through: up-front scoping to identify gaps and opportunities, creating opportunities for applicants to build strong coalitions and co-design research with relevant partners, and incorporating requirements for context and political economy analysis. These approaches are a step forward for GCRF in terms of ensuring relevance, but represent pockets of good practice rather than systematic improvement across the Fund.

- At the **award level**, most of the awards in our sample clearly demonstrated relevance, including through generating innovation, responding to recognised priorities or urgent needs, providing interdisciplinary insights, and building local capacity. Award holders had generally considered relevance in detail, driven by application requirements, and most awards aligned with country or regional priorities independently identified through our contextual analysis. Relevance depends to a large extent on how well investigators are networked and in tune with the focus communities. Award holders often rely on the existing personal and professional experience and knowledge of the investigators, and pre-existing partnerships in focal countries or regions, rather than formal needs assessments or scoping activities. Broader stakeholder consultation to inform the design of research is an area that could potentially be strengthened. Where this is done, it is typically informal and there is limited evidence of meaningful community-level engagement to identify needs and priorities at the design stage.

Coherence: To what extent and why is the GCRF portfolio coherent with, aligned to and coordinated with other global, regional and national efforts to achieve the SDGs and address development challenges?

Overall, thinking on coherence was typically less well developed than thinking on relevance, but there are several pockets of good practice that can be built on.

- As with relevance, at the **portfolio level** we found that UKRI and the Challenge Leaders are an important driver of coherence within GCRF. UKRI spearheads several coordination mechanisms that aim to promote collaboration across awards, and has conducted landscaping analysis to map priorities within the challenge portfolios. The Challenge Leaders have made explicit efforts to improve coherence through drawing on existing networks and knowledge of other initiatives, building dialogue between Research Councils, and helping to identify thematic overlaps, intersections and gaps within and beyond GCRF. However, these initiatives have had limited influence on improving coherence beyond the Research Councils. It is also unclear how far cross-HMG (Her Majesty's Government) governance structures to improve coherence in R&D within the UK have tangibly impacted decision making within GCRF.

- At the **programme level**, some large-scale GCRF programmes (particularly the Collective Fund and UK Space Agency International Partnerships Programme (UKSA IPP), collectively representing over £370 million of investment) have considered coherence more systematically in recent years. Approaches include building in formal mechanisms to identify synergies and avoid duplication of effort, incorporating reporting requirements on coordination and coherence, and conducting landscaping and mapping activities to cluster investments and identify gaps. However, it does not appear that these approaches are common across the Fund as a whole, and in general coherence

is not an explicit requirement in proposal processes. Networking calls (which encourage interdisciplinary collaborations between diverse stakeholders) are an important mechanism for promoting coherence through encouraging interdisciplinary collaborations, including between GCRF and non-GCRF stakeholders. Programme-level workshops and networking events are common and offer opportunities for identifying synergies and opportunities for collaboration between award holders, although there were only two tangible examples of this influencing practice among the awards in our sample. This is, potentially, an area that could be strengthened.

- At the **award level**, most awards in our sample were less advanced in their thinking on coherence when compared to relevance. Award holders were generally aware of potential interconnections and overlaps with other initiatives, but had not actively engaged with these initiatives to inform research design and activities. Only two awards in our sample had conducted a formal stakeholder mapping exercise to help identify synergies and overlaps, and in most cases coherence was achieved in large part through formal project partnerships rather than external collaborations. Workshops, conferences and other events were common, but there was usually limited detail on how these had helped identify synergies or overlaps and in doing so informed the direction of research – an issue that will be important to follow up in future stages of the evaluation. Topic modelling suggests that there are distinct clusters of awards covering similar areas in the same country or region, but there is limited evidence that award holders across different programmes and DPs are encouraged to connect with one another.

This review also found that while opportunities have been created for GCRF research to respond to **Covid-19** – including new funding streams, such as the Agile Response Call – adaptations to existing projects in our sample were relatively minor. In many cases the pandemic has restricted stakeholder engagement, with potential implications for relevance and coherence, although virtual activities have in some cases promoted greater inclusivity of stakeholders.

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

1. **Expand or replicate the work of the Challenge Leaders and challenge portfolios beyond UKRI**, to build on the valuable role these structures have played in improving relevance and coherence.

2. **Build coherence more explicitly into application requirements and proposal processes**, to help ensure it is considered up-front in the same way that relevance is. This should include requirements for stakeholder engagement with LMIC stakeholders beyond direct partners and the academic community.

3. **Encourage and support award holders to formally consider relevance and coherence post-proposal stage**, through providing guidance, time and resources for award holders to conduct needs assessments, expand on existing relationships to develop broad coalitions of partners, and undertake stakeholder mapping or landscape analysis to understand how their award fits into the wider ecosystem of research. This could build on existing good practice observed within the Fund and detailed in this report.

4. **Build on existing workshop, symposia and networking opportunities to support coherence in a more systematic way**, including within geographical topic clusters. These events could more actively encourage and support award holders to identify synergies and pursue collaborations, including across diverse programmes and DPs.

5. **Consider how relevance and coherence over the lifetime of awards can be more systematically measured and reported**. For example, developing reporting mechanisms requiring award holders to document both the processes undertaken to support relevance and coherence (stakeholder consultation, co-creation, contextual analysis, etc.) and the results of these processes in terms of how they have informed research design and implementation.

1 Introduction

This is the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) Relevance module report, one of four modules in the GCRF Evaluation, Stage 1a.

Stage 1a assesses GCRF's core commissioning and management functions – the activity level in the Theory of Change (ToC) – via four modules that focus on management, relevance and targeting, fairness and the integration of gender equality, 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. Stage 1a will produce an in-depth view of how GCRF works as a fund, where it is working well and where it could be improved. Box 1 provides an overview of the GCRF Evaluation.

The objective of the Relevance assessment module is to assess whether GCRF is funding the 'right things', and whether it is coherent with other initiatives addressing global, regional and national challenges. This module focuses on the relevance and coherence of GCRF to both 'global' policies and programmes, and also to regional, national and subnational needs and priorities in selected geographical areas. These questions are important, as the goal of GCRF is to '*support cutting-edge research that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries*.'[1] It is therefore important to understand whether GCRF is funding the 'right things' in order to position research for impact. Experience in the research-for-development field highlights the importance of '*early and ongoing consideration of the wider context for research application*', as depicted in the GCRF ToC.[2] Similarly, '*a lack of coherence can lead to duplication of efforts and undermine overall progress to global development goals.*'[3]

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

This report investigates the following sub-EQs:

1.3. To what extent and why are GCRF and its components consistent with and responsive to target groups' needs, sustainable development goal (SDG) priorities and partners' and funders'/donors' policies (global, regional, national and subnational)? In essence, is GCRF funding the right things?

1.2. To what extent and why is the GCRF portfolio coherent with, aligned to and coordinated with other global, regional and national efforts to achieve the SDGs and address development challenges?

1.8. How can the relevance and coherence of GCRF be improved?

Within sub-EQs1.2. and 1.3, this module also investigated how far GCRF has been able to adapt to support the global response to Covid-19, in coordination with other global efforts.

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[1] https://www.ukri.org/research/global-challenges-research-fund/

[2] Foundation Stage Report, p. B2.

[3] OECD/DAC revised criteria.

> **Box 1. Overview of GCRF and the evaluation**
>
> **GCRF is a £1.5 billion fund announced by the UK government in late 2015 to support cutting-edge research that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries.** GCRF forms part of the United Kingdom's (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 (KPI) 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.[4] It addresses the purpose through five MEQs and a three-stage design that tracks GCRF's ToC from activities to impact over five years. Each stage applies specific modules to focus on different aspects of the ToC and the Fund. Stage 1a of the evaluation runs from May 2020 to February 2021. The first, Stage 1a, consists of four modules conducted in parallel that aim to understand how BEIS and GCRF's delivery partners (DPs) manage and position the Fund to deliver on its intended aims and commitments. These four modules focus on GCRF's management, relevance and targeting, fairness and the integration of gender, social inclusion and poverty in the Fund's commissioning and processes.

1.1   Strategic and policy context for the relevance review in 2020–21

In 2020, the evaluation's inception report outlined the changing strategic and policy context for GCRF,[5] changes which will accelerate in 2021. Since GCRF started in 2015, the national policy discourse on ODA has been evolving. Several significant changes have taken place since 2020, with the implications for GCRF still emerging.

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[4] GCRF, 2018. GCRF Evaluation Foundation Stage. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-challenges-research-fund-gcrf-foundation-stage-evaluation
[5] GCRF Evaluation, Inception Report, Itad/Rand, August 2020, unpublished.

First, in February 2020 the UK government announced the Integrated Review of foreign policy, defence, security and international development.[6] 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 and 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.[7]

Second, the merger in August 2020 of the Foreign and 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.[8] 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, 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.[9]

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 at 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 national income (GNI).[10] New legislation is planned to reconcile this decision with the 2015 International Development Act, but it is not clear how this will relate to the 2002 International Development Act, which binds UK aid to make a '*contribution to a reduction in poverty*'.[11] 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 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, in collaboration with the individual Research Councils. GCRF's overall fund management function, while part of BEIS, is also hosted within UKRI, creating a centre of gravity for international development research.

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

[7] This may be influenced by the fusion doctrine. HMG, 2018. National Security Capability Review, March 2015. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/705347/6.4391_CO_National-Security-Review_web.pdf

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

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

[10] Insight. Spending Review: Reducing the 0.7% aid commitment. House of Commons Library. Published Thursday, 26 November 2020. Available at: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/spending-review-reducing-the-aid-commitment/

[11] 'Poverty reduction missing from new UK aid strategy', Devex 26 November 2020. Available at: https://www.devex.com/news/poverty-reduction-missing-from-new-uk-aid-strategy-98655

In 2020, Covid-19 has had an impact on research institutions and especially universities, in terms of both budgets[12] 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.

Taken together, 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 Relevance assessment 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.[13] 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*',[14] as progress was often led by GCRF's DPs, most notably by UKRI.

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 GCRF A summary of ICAI's full follow-up July 2019, p. 1.

Second, in 2018, the Foundation Evaluation of GCRF was carried out, focusing on the commissioning and grant making processes in the early stages of the Fund, which found similar challenges to ICAI.[15] Its headline conclusion was that '*the GCRF is operationally functional, and processes are for the most part transparent, well-run and clear*' (p. 2*)*. As a funding instrument, the evaluation noted that GCRF was in good health: a broad and diverse range of different funding tools had been deployed within a very short space of time, given the size of the Fund, with well-running call and selection processes. The evaluation also highlighted challenges which echo the ICAI recommendations – collaborations between UK

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

[13] ICAI, 2017. Global Challenges Research Fund: A rapid review, September 2017. Available at: https://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/ICAI-GCRF-Review.pdf

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

[15] GCRF, 2018. GCRF Evaluation Foundation Stage. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-challenges-research-fund-gcrf-foundation-stage-evaluation

and lower and middle-income country (LMIC) partners did not yet match GCRF's ambitions for equitable and co-produced proposals; monitoring and evaluation (M&E) activities had been slow to develop, notably the lack of a portfolio-level view of programmes and projects per DP to understand strategically where funding gaps might be filled and allow oversight and accountability.

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

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

These previous assessments made of GCRF, and the still-emerging policy and strategic context for UK aid, form the backdrop to the findings presented in this report.

1.3 Structure of the report

The report is structured as follows. Section 2 sets out the approach and methodology, identifying how we collected and analysed data and detailing strengths and limitations. Section 3 reports our findings on *relevance* (section 3.1) and *coherence* (section 3.2), and summarises insights on how far GCRF has adapted in response to Covid-19 (section 3.3). Section 4 concludes the report by summarising our conclusions and implications for the next phase, and identifying recommendations on how the relevance and coherence of GCRF can be improved.

2 Methodology

2.1 Overview of approach

Relevance and coherence are important prerequisites for research impact. The goal of GCRF is to '*support cutting-edge research that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries.*'[16] We therefore need to understand whether GCRF is funding the 'right things' in order to position research to achieve the longer-term outcomes and impact in the GCRF ToC – for example improvements in policy, technology and capacity to address complex development challenges and achieve the SDGs. Experience in the research-for-development field highlights the importance of '*early and ongoing consideration of the wider context for research application*', as depicted in the ToC.[17] This module examines **relevance** to explore how responsive GCRF research is to the needs, policies and priorities of stakeholders at global and national levels.

A closely linked consideration is **coherence**: how compatible is GCRF funding with other efforts to address global challenges? Coherence was incorporated into the revised Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) evaluation criteria in 2019, to '*better capture linkages, systems thinking, partnership dynamics, and complexity.*'[18] This report considers both internal coherence (between GCRF awards) and external coherence (between GCRF awards and other relevant non-GCRF initiatives) – although the main focus is on external coherence.[19] Both are important, as '*a lack of coherence can lead to duplication of efforts and undermine overall progress to global development goals.*'[20] Individual GCRF projects on their own will also be insufficient to address global challenges; this requires efforts to be additive and strategically joined up across the Fund, requiring coherence.

This module draws on the OECD/DAC criteria and the Research Quality+ (RQ+) Assessment Framework to assess relevance and coherence. The OECD/DAC criteria set out core principles for evaluating international development programmes and policies.[21] Relevance and coherence are two of the criteria, with coherence added in the revised version published in 2019. These criteria informed the development of questions to guide data collection and analysis (see Annex 1). The Canadian International Development Research Centre's (IDRC) RQ+ Framework was also used as a basis for the rubrics used to assess the relevance and coherence of GCRF awards (see Table 2 below). This module also tests some of the underpinning assumptions of the GCRF ToC, in particular: '*Researchers, innovators and LMIC partners have the expertise to map the landscape and co-identify priorities and research issues*'.

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[16] Information is available at: https://www.ukri.org/research/global-challenges-research-fund/

[17] GCRF. GCRF Evaluation Foundation Stage, 2018, p. B2.

[18] OECD, 'Better Criteria for Better Evaluation'

[19] '*Internal coherence addresses the synergies and interlinkages between the intervention and other interventions carried out by the same institution/government, as well as the consistency of the intervention with the relevant international norms and standards to which that institution/government adheres. External coherence considers the consistency of the intervention with other actors' interventions in the same context. This includes complementarity, harmonisation and co-ordination with others, and the extent to which the intervention is adding value while avoiding duplication of effort.*' OECD.

[20] OECD/DAC revised criteria.

[21] OECD, 'Better Criteria for Better Evaluation,' 2019, 12, http://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/revised-evaluation-criteria-dec-2019.pdf

This module considers relevance at four levels, although in practice the levels interrelate and overlap significantly.[22] Table 2 details these levels and the key considerations at each.

Table 2: **Levels of investigation and units of analysis**

Level	Scope/key considerations
Global	• Relevance of the overall portfolio and selected programmes (Interdisciplinary Research Hubs, UKRI Collective Programme, Growing Research Capacity (GROW), UK Space Agency (UKSA) International Partnership Programme, Resilient Futures) to SDGs and emerging global needs and priorities • Coherence of the overall portfolio and selected programmes to other investments and priorities of BEIS, Her Majesty's Government (HMG), the DPs and other major global actors
Regional	• Relevance of GCRF awards in selected regions (East Africa and South Asia) to regional needs and priorities • Coherence of regional/multi-country GCRF awards to other investments and priorities of key regional stakeholders and networks
National	• Relevance of GCRF awards in selected countries (Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Bangladesh and India) to the SDGs and national needs and priorities • Coherence of GCRF awards in selected countries to national priorities, strategies, policies and investments
Sub-national	• Relevance of GCRF awards in selected countries to local (state/district/community) needs and priorities • Coherence of GCRF awards in selected countries to local (i.e. state or district) strategies, policies and investments

The module incorporated two workstreams of analysis: global, and regional/national level.

- The global workstream incorporated topic modelling and mapping (see Box 2) to understand how GCRF funding was distributed across thematic areas, a portfolio-level analysis to explore how GCRF has thought about and approached relevance and coherence at a Fund level, and a review of five large, flagship global programmes.[23] We initially intended to assess programme-level relevance to global priorities using a global contextual analysis exercise. However, it became apparent that given the broad and interdisciplinary nature of the programmes under consideration, the scope would be too broad to make a global contextual analysis useful. The programme-level lens therefore focused largely on how programmes had considered relevance and coherence in their design and implementation, and on processes employed to ensure relevance and coherence at the award level.

- The regional/national workstream investigated a sample of awards per country and region, using contextual analysis, key informant interviews and a document review of award-level documents to assess the relevance and coherence of awards to regional, national and subnational priorities, policies and initiatives.

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[22] Note these levels are linked to but distinct from the four levels of GCRF outlined in the evaluation Inception Report and Management Review (Level A: Fund; Level B: DPs; Level C: Programmes; Level D: awards). This report uses a geographical framing rather than an operational one, as a geographical focus made greater conceptual sense when considering relevance and coherence to global, regional and national needs, priorities and other initiatives.

[23] Note that our initial plan was to include 10 programmes, but a decision was made to focus on a smaller number in order to allow a deeper exploration with the resources available.

2.2 Overview of data collection

Data collection was conducted through the following steps.

- **Initial mapping and topic modelling:** This was conducted using both a 'top-down' analysis (of the internal BEIS tracker) and a 'bottom-up' analysis (using Digital Science topic modelling), to analyse patterns and clusters – see Box 2 for further details. This was used to inform the selection of a subset of Challenge Areas to focus on, across two regions and five countries, selected in collaboration with BEIS (see Table 2 above).

> **Box 2. Topic modelling approach**
>
> In September 2020 Digital Science used topic modelling to identify clusters of topics within GCRF awards on the Gateway to Research (GtR) database (1,050 awards). The topic modelling was repeated for countries and regions – taking into account all countries and regions mentioned in GtR abstracts, in order to identify thematic clusters of awards in specific geographical areas. Awards from the GtR database were also cross-referenced with the BEIS tracker (Q1 2020) to look at how topics fall under Challenge Areas and SDGs noted in the tracker. For more information, see Annex 3.

- **Portfolio overview:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely with 13 BEIS, UKRI and DP stakeholders (see topic guide in Annex 2.1). A document review was also conducted, spanning 100 key GCRF, UKRI and DP-level documents relating to strategy and framing, governance, monitoring and reporting. This data was used to examine how thinking and practice on relevance and coherence within GCRF has evolved, particularly since the ICAI review in 2017.

- **Programme-level assessment:** This was followed by a more in-depth assessment of a sample of five large and flagship GCRF programmes (the UKRI Collective Programme, the Joint Academies Resilient Futures Programme, the UKRI Interdisciplinary Hubs, GROW and the UKSA IPP). The first three of these were also included in the Management module sample, enabling us to coordinate interviews and share data. The other two were selected as they represented an earlier large-scale GCRF investment (GROW, launched in 2016) and a major non-UKRI investment (UKSA IPP). Semi-structured key informant interviews with 20 DP and award-level stakeholders (see topic guide in Annex 2.2) were conducted, along with a review of key programme documents relating to programme scoping, strategy, calls and proposal processes, M&E and reporting. This data was used to assess how programmes had considered relevance and coherence and how applicants were supported to ensure relevance and coherence within their awards.

- **Contextual analysis:** Desk reviews were conducted to explore regional, national and (where possible) subnational needs, priorities and the nature of other strategic investments in the relevant sectors within the two regions and five countries selected for the award-level assessment (see Table 1 above). The aim was to generate an independent assessment of high-level national and regional needs and priorities, against which awards could be compared. Contextual analysis was conducted in three parts: first, reviewing high-level national and regional priorities; second, reviewing priorities and other policies and initiatives in relation to the selected Challenge Areas within the country or region; and finally, reviewing priorities and other initiatives in relation to the specific topics covered by the selected awards. Documents consulted for the contextual analysis included:

- Regional and national development plans, UN country plans and other high-level strategy or vision policy documents (for example SDG plans and progress reports).

- Documents relating to major national or regional policies and initiatives (governmental and non-governmental) working to address the Challenge Areas and

topics of focus for the relevant country/region (for example policy and project related web pages and news reports, sectoral policies and plans).

▪ Documents providing insights on evidence and research gaps around the Challenge Areas and topics of focus for the relevant country/region (for example journal articles and policy briefs, as well as the documents detailed above).

▪ **Award-level assessment:** A sample of 26 awards was assessed in line with the countries, regions and Challenge Areas selected for inclusion. Of the 26 awards, 19 were part of the 'common sample' and were also reviewed by the Fairness and/or GESIP module. The remaining seven awards were specific to the Relevance module. See Box 3 below for further details on the sampling approach. Key informant interviews were conducted with 55 principal investigators (PIs), co-investigators (Co-Is) and award partners (see topic guide in Annex 2.3). Key award documents were also reviewed, including proposals, Case for Support and Pathways to Impact statements, call documentation and reporting documents. Documents, interviews and contextual analysis were reviewed to assess the relevance and coherence of awards to regional, national and subnational priorities, policies and initiatives against a set of standardised rubrics (see Table 3 below).

> **Box 3. Common sample and Relevance-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 (see Table 1 above). The aim was to ensure that a core set of awards was assessed from each module's perspective, in order to help identify connections and crossovers across the modules. Of the 30 awards selected for the common sample, 23 were included in the Relevance sample (note that four of these were subsequently dropped due to a lack of response from award holders, so 19 are included in this report). These 23 awards were selected purposively from the common sample to ensure a diversity of awards across Challenge Areas, DPs and topic clusters. Joint interviews were conducted with other module leads, and insights from other modules' questions were drawn on in the synthesis of findings.
>
> The Relevance-specific sample used a purposive sampling approach to select awards at the regional level (as this lens was not incorporated into the common sample). We identified all 'East Africa regional' and 'South Asia regional' awards from the latest BEIS tracker in the relevant Challenge Areas, excluding awards that had not yet started. This returned a small number of awards (five for East Africa, three for South Asia). We prioritised awards with a true regional focus (i.e. not just multi-country). After selecting the most relevant awards, we also considered awards listed as 'Africa regional' and 'Asia regional' in the BEIS tracker to select additional awards.

Table 3: **Summary of data sources consulted for the Relevance module**

	No. cases	No. interview respondents	No. documents reviewed
Portfolio overview	N/A	13 BEIS, UKRI and DP stakeholders	100
Programme-level assessment	5	20 DP and award-level stakeholders	55
Award-level assessment	26	55 award PIs, Co-Is and partners	98

2.3 Overview of analysis

- **Portfolio-level analysis:** Interviews and documents were coded in qualitative analysis software MAXQDA, using a coding frame linked to the evaluation questions. Insights were drawn out into a portfolio analysis document. This was supplemented with insights from the independent topic modelling work conducted by Digital Science (see Box 2 above).

- **Programme-level analysis:** Programme-level interviews and documentation were reviewed and insights summarised using a standardised analysis template (see Annex 2.5).

- **Award-level analysis:** Contextual analysis was conducted following a standardised template. Award-level interviews and documents were reviewed and insights summarised using a standardised template (see Annex 2.4), which incorporated three rubrics on relevance, coherence and stakeholder engagement (see Table 4 below), against which each award was scored and the strength of evidence underpinning these judgements noted (see Box 4).

> **Box 4. Judging strength of evidence at award level**
>
> Each rubric score was assigned a 'strength of evidence' rating, based on the level of detail provided by individual sources as well as the degree of triangulation possible between the sources.
>
> **Red =** low confidence in the evidence (only one source – interview or document – or very low-detail/ low quality evidence from multiple sources)
>
> **Amber =** medium confidence in the evidence (two sources with a sufficient degree of detail)
>
> **Green =** high confidence in the evidence (3+ sources with a good degree of detail, including (for the relevance rubric only) clear alignment or misalignment with the contextual analysis)

Each write-up was reviewed by the module lead, and scores and strength of evidence judgements were adjusted in consultation with the research team to ensure consistency of scoring across the cases.

Synthesis: the portfolio analysis, programme analysis write-ups and award write-ups were coded inductively by the module lead in MAXQDA to identify emerging patterns and themes. An analysis database was also used to summarise the scores and strength of evidence judgements across the award-level write-ups and to conduct deductive analysis across key questions of interest (e.g. whether awards had conducted a formal needs assessment, and which stakeholders had been consulted), to draw out patterns across the cases. Emerging findings were sense-checked in a workshop with the full relevance research team.

Awards are referenced throughout the Findings section using unique codes (RC1, RC2, etc.), helping to demonstrate the strength of evidence underpinning specific award-level judgements. Insights and quotes from interviews at BEIS, UKRI and programme level are also referenced using unique interview codes.

After the module report had been drafted, the Management, GESIP and Fairness reports were reviewed to identify interlinkages and overlaps. Insights were subsequently drawn into later drafts of this report.

Table 4: Relevance, coherence and stakeholder engagement rubrics for award-level analysis

	Relevance	Coherence	Stakeholder engagement
Beginning	There are some indications that the award may contribute to a local priority, a key development policy or strategy, or an emerging area that might demand solutions in the near future. However, needs assessments and justification for the work are absent or unconvincing	No or very limited indication that efforts were made to identify interconnections and overlaps with other initiatives	No or very few relevant national or regional stakeholders (beyond the immediate research team) were consulted when designing or carrying out the research. Limited efforts were made to identify relevant stakeholders
Developing	There are some indications that the award might contribute to a local priority, a key development policy or an emerging area that might demand solutions in the near future. A focus on this area of work at this time appears sufficiently justified	Award holders are aware of potential interconnections and overlaps with other relevant (global, national or subnational) initiatives and have factored this knowledge into research design; however, there was no formal stakeholder analysis or active engagement with these initiatives	Some relevant national or regional stakeholders were consulted during the research process, but the range of stakeholders consulted was limited and there is limited evidence that this informed the research in a meaningful way
Good	There are several indications that the award might contribute to an important local priority, a key development policy or strategy, or an emerging area of some significance that might demand solutions in the near future. A focus on this area of work at this time has been well justified	Award holders formally or systematically (e.g. through stakeholder analysis or other similar activities) considered potential interconnections and overlaps with other initiatives, and have actively engaged with these initiatives to inform the research design and activities	A range of relevant national or regional stakeholders were consulted and engaged in meaningful ways during the research design phase. There are indications that this has informed research processes and products
Exemplary	The research is already recognised as having the potential to address a critical local priority, a key development policy or strategy or an important emerging area that is highly likely to demand solutions in the near future. A focus on this area of work at this time puts the researchers at the cutting edge of an active and/or important field of work	Award holders formally considered and mapped potential interconnections and overlaps with other initiatives, and have actively engaged with these initiatives throughout the research process. There are tangible examples of collaboration and coordination between the research and other initiatives, to share learning and capitalise on synergies	A wide range of (academic and non-academic) relevant national or regional stakeholders was engaged consistently in a systematic way, both during research design and while the research was being conducted, and there are tangible examples of how this has informed research processes and products

2.4   Strengths and limitations

The approach taken in this module allowed us to examine relevance and coherence on three levels: portfolio, programme and award. This enabled us to identify strengths and weaknesses in approaches, policies and practice across and between these different levels of GCRF.

The sampling process used to identify awards has ensured inclusion of a diversity of different types and sizes of awards, funded through a wide range of DPs and call types. The use of rubrics has enabled a systematic comparison across awards, drawing on established frameworks to generate a picture of how well established the thinking is on relevance and coherence across a range of awards.

However, there are a number of limitations to this assessment:

- Given the size and diversity of GCRF, the analysis provides only a partial picture that cannot claim to capture all facets of the Fund. The portfolio-level analysis was light touch, as a decision was made to concentrate resources at the programme and award level in order to generate new insights. Although awards were selected through a systematic process, they are not representative of the portfolio as a whole, and there were too few cases to disaggregate insights by all potentially relevant factors (for example by DP, Challenge Area, geography and size).

- At all levels, our analysis is reliant on perspectives of key stakeholders and insights from documentation, which were not possible to fully triangulate. We did not have time or resources to consult external actors at the global or award level to capture independent perspectives on the relevance and coherence of GCRF. This challenge was mitigated to some extent through our independent contextual analysis, which allowed us to compare awards' claims of relevance to the high-level priorities and needs of their focal countries and regions.

- At the award level, we included 26 cases rather than the 30 we aimed for in our sample. We approached award holders from 32 awards in total, but received no response from PIs or Co-Is across eight of these awards. We hoped to incorporate some cases from the Fairness Open Call[24] in our sample to help showcase good practice around relevance and coherence. One award submitted through the Open Call was included, but most awards with lessons to share around relevance were not related to our focal countries or regions.

- Interviews at all levels were often combined with other modules, meaning there was less time to explore relevance-specific questions. This has limited the depth and nuance of our primary data.

- It was extremely difficult to secure interviews with award holders, in part due to the tight time frame and timing of the data collection period (which coincided with teaching commitments and the Christmas break). The robustness of the award-level analysis was limited by low response rates (37 award-level stakeholders did not respond or declined an interview). We were able to interview only one stakeholder for seven awards in our sample. In many cases key documents were also not available, particularly for non-UKRI awards, as we were reliant on award holders sharing documentation (for eight awards we were able to review only 1–2 documents). These limitations are reflected in our strength of evidence judgements. We were not able to make judgements on relevance or coherence using our rubrics for two of the awards in our sample, as we were able to conduct only one interview and no documents were available.

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[24] The Fairness Module 'Open Call' asked GCRF project teams, DPs and other key informants to nominate projects that showcased good examples of partnerships and engagement.

3 Results

This section presents the key findings from this review in relation to relevance, coherence and Covid-19.

3.1 Relevance

This section considers the following sub-EQ: *To what extent and why are GCRF and its components consistent with and responsive to target groups' needs, SDG priorities and partners' and funders'/donors' policies (global, regional, national and subnational)? In essence, is GCRF funding the right things?*

Summary of findings: Relevance

- **GCRF has made efforts to improve its portfolio-level strategic focus – and therefore Fund-level relevance – since the ICAI review in 2017, but there are still important gaps.** The establishment of challenge portfolios and Challenge Leaders has been a step towards ensuring greater relevance across UKRI and Research Council awards, helping to bring projects together under a common framing and introduce more strategic focus on high-level priorities. However, the remit of the Challenge Leaders is largely limited to UKRI and Research Council portfolios, and there are questions about whether GCRF is overreliant on a small number of individuals and their networks, which is insufficient to ensure relevance across all programmes and DPs. Detailed decision making on strategy and portfolios is still very much devolved to UKRI and DPs.

- **It is difficult to draw overarching conclusions about the relevance of GCRF to addressing specific SDGs or Challenge Areas.** While SDGs are widely used and understood across the portfolio, they are very high-level and awards are often linked to multiple SDGs (reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of the Fund and the interconnectivity of the SDGs). Challenge Areas do not seem to be as widely understood, with topic modelling suggesting that the classification may have been fairly arbitrary in some cases. This makes it difficult to make meaningful judgements on the overall thematic shape of the GCRF portfolio and thus relevance to addressing specific SDGs or Challenge Areas.

- **Recent large-scale programmes have taken a more systematic approach to ensuring relevance** through up-front scoping to identify gaps and opportunities, rigorous multi-stage proposal processes providing opportunities for applicants to build strong coalitions and co-design research with relevant partners, and incorporating requirements for context and political economy analysis into project processes. These approaches represent a step forward for GCRF in terms of ensuring relevance within flagship programmes, but represent pockets of good practice rather than systematic improvement across the Fund.

- **Proposal processes and funding criteria are crucial mechanisms for ensuring relevance at the application stage, but relevance is generally not considered in ongoing monitoring and reporting requirements.** Relevance is an important consideration in application processes, with call documents ensuring a focus on ODA compliance and relevance of SDGs, and panel processes and interviews used to consider how research will respond to local contexts. While it can be challenging to ensure panels include expertise from relevant countries and regions, given the broad geographical scope of GCRF, there have been improvements in expanding the diversity of panels in recent years. However, while

proposal processes are strong, information on relevance is generally not captured in monitoring and reporting requirements outside of the major programmes.

- **Most of the awards we considered clearly demonstrated relevance to local priorities, key policies or strategies, or emerging areas of significance.** Award holders had generally considered relevance in detail, driven by requirements of the proposal process. Most awards aligned with country or regional priorities independently identified through our contextual analysis. Awards demonstrated relevance in a variety of ways, including through generating innovation, responding to recognised priorities or urgent needs, providing interdisciplinary insights and building local capacity.

- **At the award level, relevance largely depends on how well networked and plugged into the communities of focus the investigators are.** In most cases, award holders relied on the existing personal and professional experience and knowledge of the investigators, and pre-existing partnerships in focal countries or regions, rather than formal needs assessments or scoping. Partnerships were frequently used to define geographical scope, identify other partners and bring in the perspectives of broader stakeholders from target areas. This highlights the importance of ensuring awards have the right array of partners – there are some concerns, echoed in the Fairness and Management modules, that this may not always be the case. Stakeholder consultation to inform project design, beyond reaching out to academic contacts and the immediate networks of partners, is another area that could potentially be strengthened. Where consultation does take place it is typically informal, and there is limited evidence of meaningful community-level engagement to identify needs and priorities at the design stage.

3.1.1   Relevance at the global and programme level

GCRF has made efforts to improve its portfolio-level strategic focus on global challenges since the ICAI review in 2017, but decision making still sits very much with UKRI and DPs.

When GCRF was established, the operating model relied heavily on the DPs to make decisions about which research to fund. In part this was based on a commitment to the Haldane Principle, which stipulates that these decisions should be made through peer review within the academic community rather than by government.[25] As a result, the initial GCRF portfolio largely emerged out of the pre-existing work, networks and strengths of DPs. This was also exacerbated by a strong push to 'get money out the door' quickly rather than investing time to scope and design research to address specific challenges.

In their 2017 review, ICAI argued that BEIS had not done enough to set the strategic direction of the Fund and that the speed of implementation often led DPs to focus on scaling up established activities rather than supporting new or previously underfunded areas. This risked a scattered approach rather than a strategic focus on global priorities, and recommended that GCRF '*formulate a more deliberate strategy to encourage concentration on high-priority development challenges*.'[26] BEIS partially accepted this recommendation, and responded though introducing thematic challenge portfolios (on global health, food systems, conflict, resilience, education and sustainable cities) overseen by senior academics in the role of Challenge Leaders. GCRF also established 12 Interdisciplinary Research Hubs.

As discussed below, these responses have strengthened GCRF's efforts to ensuring relevance at the portfolio level, although is very much UKRI-centric, and the Management Review finds

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[25] Ministry of Reconstruction, 'Report of the Machinery of Government Committee under the Chairmanship of Viscount Haldane of Cloan' (London, 1918). Available at: https://www.civilservant.org.uk/library/1918_Haldane_Report.pdf
[26] ICAI, 'Global Challenges Research Fund: A Rapid Review', 2017. Available at: https://icai.independent.gov.uk/review/gcrf/

that detailed decision making on strategy and portfolios is still very much devolved to UKRI and DPs.

The GCRF strategy (see Box 5) is described by BEIS as '*more of a set of principles*' than a formal strategic framework,[27] with decision making on how to apply it across the portfolio largely delegated to DPs, beyond the establishment of formal 'red lines' around the need for ODA compliance. Similarly, the Management Review finds that the strategy is a loose, overarching framework rather than a strong driver of DP activities. Fund-level strategy evolves through discussions between the BEIS policy team, the DPs (through a UKRI GCRF coordination group), and the Strategic Advisory Group.[28] Aspects of strategy are also escalated up to the BEIS Portfolio and Operations Management Board, which oversees GCRF and the Newton Fund to question or endorse. One UKRI stakeholder felt the Strategic Advisory Group had helped retain focus on the defining criteria of GCRF, including the focus on problem-led research, but there is limited evidence to suggest these structures play a substantial role in ensuring relevance across the GCRF portfolio. The Management and Fairness modules also highlight that Southern engagement at a strategy level is limited, potentially inhibiting a consistent focus on portfolio-level relevance to LMIC priorities and needs.

> **Box 5. GCRF strategy**
>
> **The GCRF strategy**[29] **outlines four main ways in which the Fund aimed to ensure research was relevant to global, country and partner/institution needs, policies and priorities:**
>
> - **Aligning to the SDGs and GCRF Challenge Areas:** GCRF research is intended to contribute meaningfully to the success of the 17 SDGs as well as to 12 GCRF 'Challenge Areas' (which are similarly broad and to a large extent overlap with the aims of the SDGs).
> - **Ensuring alignment with ODA guidelines:** GCRF research should promote the economic development and welfare of a developing country as its primary objective, in line with ODA guidelines.
> - **Being high-quality, solutions-focused and interdisciplinary:** GCRF research should be solutions-focused and conducted across disciplines to address multidimensional challenges in original and transformative ways. 'Research excellence' is viewed as a prerequisite for impactful research. GCRF is viewed as an opportunity for UK academics to engage in a '*new model of transdisciplinary collaboration*.'[30]
> - **Meaningful Southern engagement and partnership:** Within GCRF awards, partners in the Global South should play a leading role in '*problem identification and the design, definition and development of the proposed approach*' – in order to demonstrate relevance to local needs as well as '*local appetite and capacity to implement solutions*.'

While SDGs and Challenge Areas are used across the portfolio as a framing device and to help ensure ODA compliance, mapping the GCRF portfolio against them provides limited insight into relevance at the Fund level.

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[27] Interview DP62.

[28] The Strategic Advisory Group is made up of 14 members across academia, NGOs, industry and program developers, and is engaged with GCRF's strategic research agenda and prioritisation of challenge topics – for example they supported the development of the 'agile response call' to respond to Covid-19.

[29] BEIS, 'UK Strategy for the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF)', 2017. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/623825/global-challenges-research-fund-gcrf-strategy.pdf

[30] BEIS, 'GCRF Strategic Advisory Group: Criteria for GCRF Funding', 2017.

SDGs are widely used within GCRF strategic and management documents as well as in funding and reporting guidance and criteria, with award holders often required to indicate relevance to SDGs in proposals. DP stakeholders reported that award holder familiarity with the SDGs has increased over time and the SDGs are also familiar to international partners, including government ministries.[31] DP and UKRI stakeholders felt they were helpful to give broad oversight of the way GCRF investments address the SDGs but were generally too broad to be useful for identifying strategic priorities or shaping specific calls.[32] Many GCRF calls allow applicants to link their proposal to any relevant SDG, and they frequently select multiple relevant goals (in reflection of the interdisciplinary nature of the Fund).

The Challenge Areas appear to be less well used and understood within GCRF. Challenge Leaders suggested they are helpful because they cut across themes and sectors, unlike the more thematically siloed SDGs: '*they allow us to process multiple SDGs in meaningful ways to understand clusters of challenges at any point in time*'[33] and they have been used more actively in the shaping of some of the Collective Programme calls (see section 3.1.2 below). However, many award holders were not familiar with them, and one Challenge Manager felt they are often used in a '*hit-and-miss*' way. The Management Review also found that the Challenge Areas do not provide a clear organising structure to the award portfolio.

The evaluation raises questions about how meaningful the classification of awards to Challenge Areas and SDGs is in some cases. Topic modelling showed that several topic clusters fit across multiple Challenge Areas, suggesting that for some awards the Challenge Area classification may have been inconsistently applied (see Annex 3).[34] Cross-referencing award topic by SDG classification also showed considerable diversity in the topics of awards classified under the same SDG. For example, under SDG 1 (No Poverty), awards spanned topics including violence, the environment, food production, civil society and cultural heritage. While unsurprising given the broad and interdisciplinary nature of some of the SDGs, this reinforces the difficulty of drawing overarching conclusions on the relevance of the GCRF portfolio to addressing specific SDGs or Challenge Areas or making meaningful judgements on the overall thematic shape of the portfolio. This also has implications for how much can be discerned from two recently introduced KPIs, which aim to measure GCRF spend by SDG and Challenge Area.

The establishment of challenge portfolios and Challenge Leaders has been a step towards ensuring greater relevance at Fund level, although these mechanisms are very UKRI-centric and there is substantial reliance on the existing networks of Challenge Leaders.

The six thematic portfolios are felt to have provided a useful framework to bring together projects under a common framing and ensure thematically aligned investments are leveraged, introducing more strategic focus on top of the 12 Challenge Areas originally identified in the GCRF strategy. The Challenge Leaders oversee the Collective Programme, which aims to address strategic issues across the six portfolios.

As also found by the Management Review, the response to Challenge Leaders within GCRF is largely positive. UKRI and Research Council stakeholders reported that they have helped to eliminate duplication and reinforce synergies by providing strategic direction, acting as a point of reference for individuals working within specific Challenge Areas and establishing clear portfolios of research.[35] Challenge Leaders are independent with significant autonomy and are encouraged to own and lead thinking within their portfolios. They develop proposals for

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[31] Interviews DP 1,22.

[32] Interviews RG11, 18.

[33] Interview RG16.

[34] Based on a classification of GCRF research on Gateway to Research (1050 awards) by topic, using the Digital Science Dimensions tool.

[35] Interviews M4, M6.

events or activities, in collaboration with Research Councils and Challenge Managers (who sit within the Councils), which are assessed centrally against an overarching strategy by a senior management team. As far as we could ascertain, there are no set mechanisms for Challenge Leaders to use to shape and guide the portfolios – approaches vary and include 1:1 meetings, large symposia, and leveraging networks through conferences and events in a particular field. For example, a roundtable on cities and the built environment in Delhi helped to develop the two 'sustainable cities' calls.

A key contribution of the Challenge Leaders has been their existing networks and links to stakeholders in the Global South – which was highlighted as a major factor in helping to ensure relevance. This comes with a corresponding challenge of ensuring that perspectives that go beyond Challenge Leaders' individual contacts are built in sufficiently. This links to Management Review findings that GCRF existing networks may contribute to high investment in middle-income countries. There was little evidence that potentially relevant stakeholders had been systematically mapped (e.g. through stakeholder mapping activities) to ensure a breadth and diversity of perspectives beyond existing contacts. However, one Challenge Manager felt that two years on from the appointment of Challenge Leaders, '*we have a much broader network of external contacts and stakeholders to consult […] it has become more collaborative*.'

A more substantial limitation – echoed in the Management Review – is that the Challenge Leaders' remit sits largely within UKRI and the Research Councils. They are less well connected to the work of Academies and the other DPs, meaning that approximately one-third of the GCRF portfolio by spend (see Management Review) falls outside of their influence. UKRI reports that Challenge Leaders do meet with Academies and there are some examples of them working together, but that integration is still limited. UKSA also reported that an 'ad hoc' relationship had begun with Challenge Leaders, with some joint initiatives (e.g. collaborating on a call for proposals), but that they hadn't yet fully taken advantage of the structure. The next phase of the evaluation will take a deeper look at the Challenge Leader structure and its implementation, in order to explore strengths and weaknesses in greater depth.

Outside the Challenge Leader and challenge portfolio structures, analysis on balance of portfolio seems to vary by DP – from limited or no analysis at all to more focused analysis aimed at identifying gaps and informing funding calls. The Management Review found that a significant number of stakeholders felt that more work was required to provide greater strategic direction within GCRF to ensure a balanced portfolio, especially given the emergence of other, more targeted research-for-development funds (e.g. the Ayrton Fund). Overall, there are questions about whether GCRF is overreliant on largely informal processes driven by a small number of individuals and their networks, which is insufficient to ensure relevance across all programmes and DPs.

Recent large-scale programmes have taken a more systematic approach to ensuring relevance through varying approaches.

GCRF is made up of an array of different funding mechanisms. In many cases DPs and programmes do not define priorities or challenges up-front, with the identification of relevant topics and issues instead sitting at the award level. Across the 14 call documents we were able to review for the award-level analysis, nearly half had very high-level and broad areas of focus. 'Open Calls' have been common across the Fund – these can be any topic or theme and are not guided by specific global or local challenges, but instead often emphasised interdisciplinary research across broad topic areas. For example, the GROW Programme (launched in 2016) required applicants to frame their project around up to three development challenges in the UK Aid Strategy and/or the SDGs, with applicants free to identify any constellation of

challenges or SDGs they wished.[36] Similarly, the Challenge-led grants scheme within the Resilient Futures programme (launched in 2017) invited proposals cutting across multiple disciplines and thematic areas.[37]

However, more recent flagship programmes have taken a more proactive approach to considering relevance at the programme level:

The **Collective Programme** was launched in 2020, with almost £150 million available across a series of calls designed to enhance impact across the six challenge portfolios. Calls were designed by the Challenge Leaders, and involved a portfolio analysis of around 700 funded projects in order to identify gaps and opportunities across portfolios. Stakeholder consultations were also conducted, driven by Challenge Leaders' networks. For example, consultations for security and conflict calls within the Collective Programme included working with grantees and other stakeholders within the UK as well as international partners and policymakers, and assessing the landscape of emerging or unresolved challenges, although these mapping and scoping activities were relatively rapid due to short time frames. The Collective Programme also identified three cross-cutting themes on climate change, gender and the built environment, through collective workshops led by Challenge Leaders with input from senior GCRF management.

The **Interdisciplinary Research Hubs** were launched in 2017 to fund transformative research to address intractable global challenges, with each Hub awarded between £13 million and £20 million over a five-year period. Hubs were designed to cut across the SDGs through addressing complex, multidimensional development challenges in an interdisciplinary way.[38] Unlike the Collective Programme calls, UKRI did not define specific thematic areas in advance but instead aimed towards diverse coverage of key areas in relation to the SDGs and Challenge Areas, with applications assessed on the basis of the relevance of the identified challenges and proposed solutions. This resulted in 12 Hubs being funded from an initial submission pool of more than 250 applications.[39] Partnerships were an important consideration during the selection process and a key driver of relevance. Hubs were expected to demonstrate that their priorities and areas of focus were co-designed with partners across academia, government, international agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community groups in developing countries. The two-stage proposal process provided more time for award holders to establish partnerships and co-design priorities with stakeholders.

The **UKSA International Partnerships Programme** has incorporated new stages into projects established through its latest round of funding in order to help ensure relevance – for example building in a mandatory 'Discovery Phase' involving context or landscape analysis, and requiring political economy analysis and 'user requirements' documentation during the implementation phase. International partners are also required to be involved in and sign off on the development of the project ToC.

These varying approaches represent a step forward for GCRF in terms of ensuring relevance within flagship programmes. However, they do not appear to be widely used across the Fund as a whole.

Proposal processes and funding criteria are crucial mechanisms for ensuring relevance within DPs and programmes – more so than ongoing M&E.

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[36] GCRF RCUK Collective Fund, 'Growing Research Capability to Meet the Challenges Faced by Developing Countries Call Document', 2016.

[37] The Royal Society, 'Challenge-Led Grants', 2019, https://royalsociety.org/grants-schemes-awards/grants/challenge-led-grants/

[38] UKRI, 'Interdisciplinary Research Hubs Reporting Guidance', 2019.

[39] GCRF, 'Interdisciplinary Research Hubs to Address Intractable Challenges Faced by Developing Countries Call Document', 2018.

In general, the main way that DPs and programmes ensure relevance is through the funding application process. DPs are required to build mechanisms to ensure ODA compliance into all funding processes, but beyond this DPs have considerable leeway over how they decide on where funding should go. The GCRF Foundation Stage evaluation found that there was generally widespread satisfaction among DP panellists regarding the quality and relevance of applications, and that the application process provided the opportunity to screen out proposals with '*weak or tokenistic international partnerships*' and those with limited potential to achieve international development impact.[40] The Management Review found that GCRF processes typically build on existing DP funding processes, which are well established and accepted by the UK R&I community.

Interviews with award holders consistently emphasised the significance of the proposal process for guiding thinking on ODA compliance and linkage to SDGs and impact pathways. Call documents were described by DP-level stakeholders as '*one of the most powerful tools*' to influence how applications are developed and framed.[41] 'Letters of support' are required in some cases – for example UKSA IPP proposals require letters, usually from ministerial level, to help judge that the project is a national priority.

Panels are another key mechanism for assessing the relevance of proposals. Larger awards such as the Hubs and Collective Programme often involve detailed multi-stage assessments. As part of the assessment process, panellists consider how research will respond to local contexts. Interviews are viewed as an important mechanism for understanding '*which teams were really strong, working together and prioritising local challenges*' rather than simply '*looking good on paper.*'[42] The significance of panels to determining relevance highlights the importance of ensuring panels are representative of the countries in which awards are based, to ensure local context, needs and priorities are adequately considered. This is challenging given the broad geographical scope of GCRF, as discussed further below. However, GCRF has succeeded in including a greater diversity of voices on panels, moving away from '*panels which were mainly white male academic experts*'[43] and improving representation from experts in LMICs – a finding also echoed in the Management and Fairness modules. The UKRI International Development Peer Review college was set up in 2018 to ensure LMIC perspectives were central to the review of GCRF opportunities. It consists of 300 members, drawn from academic and non-academic backgrounds, 90% of whom are from ODA-eligible countries.[44] A UKRI stakeholder reported that there is a target to have equal representation across UK and overseas researchers and policymakers/research users – this was felt to be important, although difficult to achieve in practice.[45]

Although proposal processes are strongly aligned to establishing relevance, there is less focus on relevance in monitoring and reporting processes. Outside the large flagship programmes (for example the Hubs and UKSA IPP), which have more stringent reporting requirements, most DPs do not require award holders to demonstrate the continued relevance of their awards to global or national priorities – although UKRI award holders are required to immediately report any changes in the award that could affect the ODA compliance of the award.[46] All UKRI and Research Council awards are required to report annually on ResearchFish; this reporting continues for five years after the award is completed. This

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[40] Julian Barr *et al.*, 'GCRF Evaluation – Foundation Stage: Final Report',. June (2018). Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-challenges-research-fund-gcrf-foundation-stage-evaluation

[41] Interviews M6, RG11.

[42] Interview RG11.

[43] Intervew RG16.

[44] UKRI, 'International Development Peer Review College', 2020. Available at: https://www.ukri.org/apply-for-funding/how-we-make-decisions/international-development-peer-review-college/

[45] Interview DP58.

[46] GCRF, 'GCRF Specific Terms and Conditions,' 2020.

includes fields to capture data on collaborations and partnerships as well as engagement activities, which are indirectly linked to relevance, but these fields are in most cases not mandatory, and award holders often provide limited detail.[47]

> *Continued [ODA] compliance […] is a challenge to keep monitoring […] We are trying to monitor this without adding to the reporting burden. We are using ResearchFish […] but this doesn't capture everything, it is only as good as what people submit. (DP stakeholder, DP24 & 25)*

GCRF's broad geographical scope poses challenges to ensuring funded work is relevant to national needs and priorities.

GCRF's geographical scope is very broad, as detailed in the evaluation inception report.[48] This was highlighted by some stakeholders as a key value of the Fund, enabling comparative focus across countries and South–South learning. UKRI described the approach as '*much more open*' than other ODA funding agencies and programmes, designed to nurture '*pockets of excellence*' in different places around the world.[49]

However, the 2017 ICAI review pointed out that '*the GCRF's focus on research excellence may continue to advantage developing countries that already have credible research institutions, rather than directing investment towards poorer countries where capacity building may be most needed.*'[50] The Management Review echoes this, finding that Challenge Leaders have faced difficulties in ensuring a broad geographical mix of programmes, as assessments of research excellence tend to skew towards areas with a more developed research communities – for example leading to disproportionate funding directed towards East Africa when compared to West Africa. The broad focus also poses several challenges in ensuring relevance at programme and award level, making it harder to understand in-country needs during scoping work for calls or to ensure relevant panellists assess proposals.

> *Because we don't partner with any particular country under each call, it's a lot harder to [do] more directed intelligence gathering about in-county needs and harder to know who to target. We try to be as broad and inclusive as possible, but I think it can be a bit hit-and-miss as to who we reach out to. (DP stakeholder, RG11)*

3.1.2 Relevance at the award level

Most of the awards in our sample clearly demonstrated relevance to an important local priority, a key development policy or strategy, or an emerging area of some significance.

Of the 26 awards in our sample, 14 scored 'good' in relation to relevance and four awards scored 'exemplary' (Figure 1). Of these, the vast majority (16 of 18 awards) aligned with country or regional priorities independently identified through our contextual analysis – for example specific goals from national or regional plans, or specific research gaps. Several awards aligned to multiple national priorities or objectives, reflecting their interdisciplinary nature (e.g. gender and climate change). The awards that did not align directly to priorities in our contextual analysis typically justified themselves in relation to an issue that affected many people in the countries of focus (such as issues around disability or citizenship voice) but that

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[47] ResearchFish, 'ResearchFish Question Set,' 2021.

[48] Isabel Vogel, Victoria Sword-Daniels, and Susan Guthrie, 'Global Challenges Research Fund Evaluation Inception Report', 2020.

[49] Interview DP66.

[50] ICAI, 'Global Challenges Research Fund: A Rapid Review'.

were not a recognised political priority, or cross-cutting issues that affect multiple sectors and are less clearly aligned with priority thematic areas of focus (for example datafication). This highlights that 'relevance' cannot simply be defined by the recognised priorities of governments, as these may not always be in line with citizen rights and needs or emerging global issues of significance.

Figure 1: Relevance judgements (see Annex 2.4 for rubric)
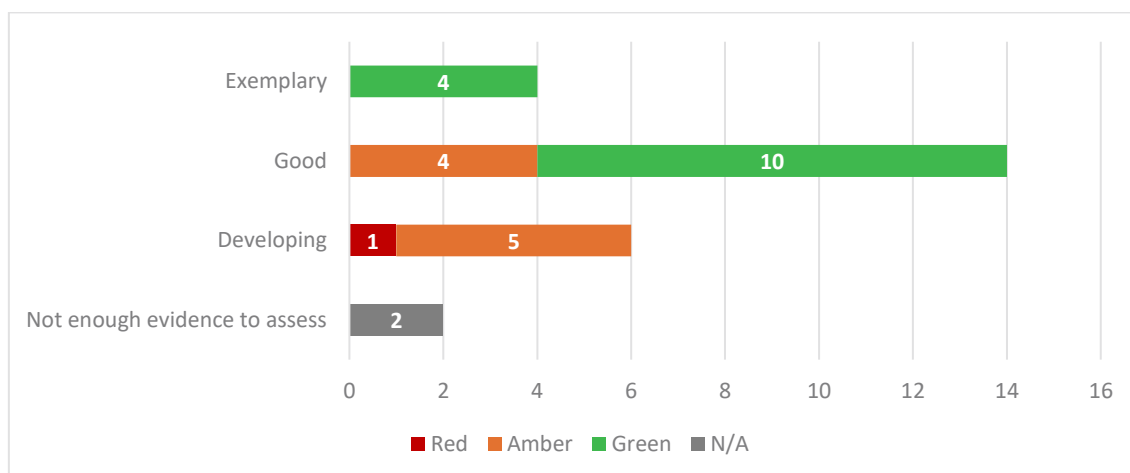
Red = low confidence in the evidence (only one source – interview or document – or very low-detail/low quality evidence from multiple sources). Amber = medium confidence in the evidence (two sources with a sufficient degree of detail). Green = high confidence in the evidence (3+ sources with a good degree of detail, including clear alignment or misalignment with the contextual analysis).

Award holders had generally considered relevance in some detail, as the proposal process required applicants to justify the relevance of their projects – including through demonstrating ODA relevance and describing how their award would respond to the SDGs and achieve development impact. Most awards (15) included a clear rationale in their proposals with reference to existing evidence and literature, and identified a development problem or gap to which their research was oriented. Some more practically focused awards incorporated less formal literature but frequently drew on national data or statistics to justify the award focus.

The four 'exemplary' awards demonstrated strong engagement with a wide range of relevant partners, going beyond academia to include civil society, industry, service providers, communities and/or government, building on and expanding existing research and networks in new and innovative ways – see Box 6 below for an example. They also demonstrated potential for broader application beyond the geographical areas of study. In contrast, where awards were judged 'developing' this was often because they were high-level and theoretical, with limited detail from interviews or documents to justify the research in relation to national or regional priorities, unclear routes to impact, and/or limited efforts to consult with stakeholders (beyond immediate academic partners) on stakeholder needs or the relevance of research to local problems.[51] In some cases there was an absence of convincing evidence on the nature of the problem and the need for a technological solution. In other cases, limited documentary evidence meant that a judgement of 'developing' was made, when access to proposals or other documents may have provided enough justification of relevance to judge the award as 'good'.[52]

Relevance relied to a large extent on existing personal and professional experience and pre-existing partnerships in focal countries or regions, rather than formal scoping processes.

[51] Awards 4, 19, 23.

[52] Awards 6, 9, 18. Note that none of the awards judged 'developing' had good evidence in support of the judgement – see Figure 1.

11 of the 26 awards in our sample built directly on previous research, while the remainder typically represented new lines of enquiry that indirectly built on the previous work of the investigators. In several cases, project ideas already existed and were simply shaped to fit the demands of the GCRF call. Awards frequently built on pre-existing relationships between the PI and Co-Is, which helped ensure the relevance of the award to the local, national or regional context.[53] This echoes findings from the Fairness module, which found that over 80% of the awards in its sample (34 of 48) had developed partnerships from existing relationships, particularly among smaller grants. These existing collaborations were often deep and spanned many years, and were frequently used to identify and define the geographical scope of the award, as well as other partners.[54] Where partnerships extended beyond academia, this brought in the perspectives of industry and civil society, potentially strengthening relevance by ensuring research could be directly applied by partners. Awards were often shaped by discussions (more or less formal) between PIs, Co-Is and their colleagues and networks.[55]

> *Both partners had worked on other projects (together and separately) focusing on the [issue], so this was not a new area, they already knew the people who could do the project and that they would be able to deliver it, so they did not start from scratch. They had knowledge from previous experience in the field and this was reflected in their GCRF application. (Award 22)*

Strong partnerships are thus clearly a key cornerstone of relevance across GCRF, suggesting that having the right array of partners is essential. Some concerns were raised in relation to this. For example, some awards had no partners in some of the countries they were working in[56] – echoing findings from the Fairness module that a small number of countries and institutions account for a significant share of the total number of GCRF partnerships. As flagged in the Management and Fairness module reports, short-call time frames mean that PIs often rely on existing partnerships rather than developing new ones, meaning that Co-Is may not always be the most appropriate to help ensure continued relevance to local needs and priorities. The Fairness module also found that short time frames also often contribute to proposals being written by Northern partners who are more familiar with the process, potentially undermining the opportunity for Southern partners to ensure the award is designed in line with local needs and priorities.

Only eight awards in our sample conducted a formal or semi-formal needs assessments at the beginning to help design the project. This was generally not a requirement across the call documents we reviewed for the awards in our sample, although UKSA IPP and Hub awards required some form of scoping work at the design stage (as discussed in section 3.1.1. above). Some award holders justified the absence of a formal needs assessment or similar with reference to the expertise of the team and their pre-existing connections to local stakeholders,[57] while others referred to time and resource constraints.[58] Six of the eight awards that conducted needs assessments built on previous research grants, with some of the needs assessment work predating the receipt of GCRF funding, enabling richer and deeper stakeholder engagement and scoping during the proposal and design stages.

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[53] Awards 5, 10, 14, 20, 22, 25.

[54] Awards 4, 23, 24, 25, 26.

[55] Awards 1, 5, 8, 18, 19.

[56] Awards 8, 19.

[57] Awards 1, 11, 12, 20.

[58] Awards 24, 25.

> *The previous work that the PI and the Co-Is had been doing for over a decade, the knowledge they had of the problem and awareness of the gaps in addressing it worked as a needs assessment: they did not have to conduct one specifically for this award because they had been building their knowledge in this area for years before the GCRF call came out. (Award 11)*

Awards demonstrated relevance in a wide variety of ways, including through generating innovation, responding to recognised priorities or urgent needs, providing interdisciplinary insights and building local capacity.

The relevance of awards was driven by a variety of factors, which differed substantially across the cases, reflecting the diversity of GCRF-funded work.

- Some awards were justified based on their potential to deliver large-scale social goods that would not be funded through commercial, profit-oriented channels, while others aimed to open up a '*new and pressing research agenda*' around pioneering topics that have not been previously studied.[59]

- Interdisciplinarity was often discussed as a driver of relevance – bringing together different disciplines in new ways or providing a new lens to understand a recognised problem in deeper ways.[60]

- Some awards were directly designed to engage with policy priorities or observed windows of opportunity.[61] For example, the Nitrogen Hub in South Asia was predicated on a favourable policy environment and indications of senior government buy-in (see Box 8 below), while other awards linked into UK or national policy priorities or prominent debates. Conversely, other awards focused on issues that affect significant numbers of people (e.g. maternal mortality, disability) but which were observed to have insufficient national or regional political attention.[62]

- Capacity building was another important component of relevance, with award holders emphasising the potential to improve national or local capacity (in terms of technical research skills, capacity to apply a new technology, or availability of foundational data) to respond to pressing challenges.[63]

- Many awards emphasised their potential to benefit a broad range of global stakeholders through providing insights or solutions that could be applied in other LMICs or at a global level.[64] However, it was rarely clear how award holders planned to ensure findings were shared and used beyond the immediate national and regional networks of award holders; it will be important to reflect on this more deeply in subsequent stages of the evaluation.

It would be valuable for GCRF to showcase and highlight good practice across these different dimensions, to share learning and inspiration about how different types of awards can maximise their relevance to local needs and priorities.

Stakeholder consultation – beyond academic partners and the immediate contacts of partners – is an area that could be strengthened.

There were some examples of consultation with wider stakeholders (beyond academics and partners) to consult on research ideas – largely with service providers, industry or civil society

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[59] Awards 1, 5, 16.

[60] Awards 15, 19, 26.

[61] Awards 10, 12, 15, 19, 24.

[62] Awards 17, 20.

[63] Awards 1, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12.

[64] Awards 4, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 22, 23, 26.

stakeholders[65] – but limited evidence of meaningful community-level engagement to identify needs and priorities at the award design stage. Some award holders pointed to the highly technical nature of their awards as a reason for not engaging broader stakeholders.[66] Although our case studies were not designed to evaluate the suitability of individual awards, some potential question marks were raised about the community-level applicability of certain ideas, which had the potential to have been addressed through better up-front consultation with a broader range of stakeholders. For example, some awards were based on technological solutions in rural areas with poor technology infrastructure,[67] while another had made an erroneous assumption about the role of insurance companies that undermined the suitability of the proposed intervention.[68] This suggested that some awards may have been driven by a pre-existing idea that investigators wished to test, rather than a grounded understanding of local needs.

Stakeholder engagement is discussed in more detail in Boxes 6 and 7 below.

> **Box 6. Meaningful stakeholder engagement and co-creation to support relevance: the case of SASHI**
>
> The South Asia Self-Harm Research Capacity Building Initiative (SASHI) aims to bring together a critical mass of international expertise and research excellence to build capability and capacity to conduct research on deliberate self-harm (DSH). The award built on over a decade of foundational work in the region on self-harm by project partners. SASHI was exemplary not only in identifying the wide range of stakeholders and planning their engagements in the project but also in conducting rigorous stakeholder engagement activities and using the suggestions to introduce meaningful changes to the project design.
>
> SASHI used a systematic approach to stakeholder engagement that expanded and deepened the existing relationships of the research team. A clear stakeholder engagement plan included in the proposal identified specific stakeholder groups – including individuals at risk of DSH and suicide and their families, policymakers, community members, health and care workers and academia – and also identified activities to engage each group.
>
> The project has an advisory group that involves a wide range of stakeholders, including other actors in the DSH-related research and care arena. When the project started it consulted with local actors, including policymakers and community health workers in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and India. For example, community health care workers were involved in identifying care needs and areas of intervention. After implementation began, the project organised several knowledge exchange events in collaboration with local professional associations, hospitals and students, which have also informed the project. Local-level actors – including individuals at risk, families and communities – have been engaged through videos and social media to '*continuously engage with potential stakeholders in a bi-directional way*'. Engagement has led to tangible changes to research design and plans – for example, a planned survey of knowledge and attitudes towards self-harm and suicide in a tribal area was abandoned after the team visits to the area and discussions with local stakeholders. The aim is to embed the project within local-level NGOs and health infrastructure so that project ideas are co-created.
>
> Thanks to broad stakeholder engagement, the research project is contextualised, culturally relevant, and more likely to have an impact.

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[65] Awards 4, 15, 17, 18, 24.

[66] Award 16.

[67] Awards 6, 25.

[68] Award 7.

Box 7. How have GCRF award holders approached stakeholder engagement?

Meaningful stakeholder engagement is important for both relevance and coherence, to help identify needs and priorities and to ensure the award capitalises on potential synergies and avoids duplication. We considered how far stakeholders (e.g. academic, government, civil society and community-level actors) were actively consulted and engaged in design and implementation.

Most (15) of the awards in our sample scored 'good' or 'exemplary' in relation to stakeholder engagement (see Figure 2), meaning that they had consulted a range of relevant stakeholders and there were indications that this had informed research processes and products. This finding is echoed in the Fairness module, which also found evidence of extensive engagement with stakeholders beyond formal partners. Almost all the awards in our sample (22) had engaged in some way with government, civil society and/or community-level stakeholders in addition to academic stakeholders. However, in many cases stakeholder engagement plans were vague. While some call documentation explicitly wanted evidence of stakeholder engagement beyond academic communities, in many cases this was not a formal requirement, with the focus generally limited to ensuring local partnerships. Even the Hub application process, with its strong emphasis on deep and diverse partnerships, did not include requirements to show that solutions had been developed in collaboration with stakeholders other than partners.

We noted a spectrum of different types of engagement across the cases:

- **Informing**, for example to gain access to communities or to disseminate findings. Four awards were only engaging stakeholders to inform rather than consult or collaborate.
- **Collaborating**, for example through advisory bodies or ongoing engagement through conversations, meetings, conferences, networks, working groups, etc. Nine awards were collaborating in some way with non-academic stakeholders, largely informally.
- **Co-creating**: stakeholders helping to shape research agendas in line with needs, priorities and research gaps. 11 awards were conducting at least some co-creation work with some categories of non-academic stakeholders.

One of the weakest areas was community-level engagement. UKRI stakeholders emphasised that '*we absolutely expect the grant holders to engage with local communities*' in order to support pathways to impact. However, we found that community-level engagement was often functional – if it was conducted at all; nine of the awards in our sample engaged citizens and communities only for the purposes of collecting data or as an audience for findings. When asked for examples, award holders often referenced engagement as part of research (e.g. through participation as study participants in interviews, focus groups, surveys, etc.) and/or as a prerequisite for gaining access to communities. The Fairness module highlighted that a lack of time and resources sometimes constrained community-level engagement.

Figure 2: Stakeholder engagement judgements
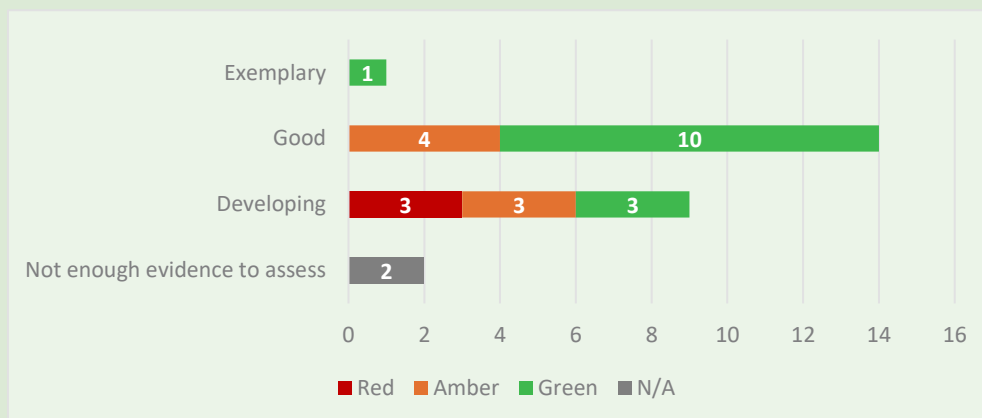
Red = low confidence in the evidence (only one source – interview or document – or very low-detail/low quality evidence from multiple sources). Amber = medium confidence in the evidence (two sources with a sufficient degree of detail). Green = high confidence in the evidence (3+ sources with a good degree of detail).

3.2 Coherence

This section considers the following sub-EQ: *To what extent and why is the GCRF portfolio coherent with, aligned to and coordinated with other global, regional and national efforts to achieve the SDGs and address development challenges?*

Coherence was incorporated into the revised OECD/DAC evaluation criteria in 2019, to '*better capture linkages, systems thinking, partnership dynamics, and complexity.*'[69] This section considers both internal coherence (between GCRF awards) and external coherence (between GCRF awards and other relevant non-GCRF initiatives) – although the main focus is on external coherence.[70]

Summary of findings: Coherence

- **There has been less explicit thinking within GCRF on coherence than on relevance.** While the GCRF strategy references coherence, stakeholders suggested that relevance had been more deliberately considered over the lifetime of the Fund. Unlike relevance, there was generally no explicit requirement for coherence in proposal or reporting processes beyond requiring Southern partnerships and stakeholder engagement. Although there have been several advances in cross-HMG governance structures to improve coherence in research and development (R&D) within the UK, it is unclear how far these have tangibly impacted decision making within GCRF.

- **UKRI and the Challenge Leaders are important drivers of coherence within GCRF.** UKRI spearheads several coordination mechanisms that aim to promote collaboration and coherence, and conducted landscaping analysis to map priorities within the challenge portfolios. The Challenge Leaders have made explicit efforts to improve coherence through drawing on existing networks and knowledge of other initiatives, building dialogue between Research Councils and helping to identify thematic overlaps, intersections and gaps within and beyond GCRF. However, these initiatives have had less impact beyond the Research Councils.

- As with relevance, some large-scale GCRF programmes have considered coherence more systematically in recent years, and networking calls offer targeted opportunities to foster collaborations. The UKSA IPP, Interdisciplinary Research Hubs and Collective Programme have used a variety of approaches to improve coherence, including building in formal mechanisms to identify synergies and avoid duplication of effort, incorporating reporting requirements on coordination and coherence, and conducting landscaping and mapping activities to cluster investments and identify gaps. However, these approaches are less common beyond large flagship GCRF programmes. Networking calls are also an important mechanism within GCRF for promoting coherence at the programme and award level through encouraging interdisciplinary collaborations between academic and non-academic stakeholders and between GCRF and non-GCRF stakeholders.

- Programme-level workshops and networking events are common across the Fund and offer opportunities for identifying synergies between award holders. These opportunities were appreciated by award holders as opportunities to connect with

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[69] OECD, 'Better Criteria for Better Evaluation'.

[70] '*Internal coherence addresses the synergies and interlinkages between the intervention and other interventions carried out by the same institution/government, as well as the consistency of the intervention with the relevant international norms and standards to which that institution/government adheres. External coherence considers the consistency of the intervention with other actors' interventions in the same context. This includes complementarity, harmonisation and co-ordination with others, and the extent to which the intervention is adding value while avoiding duplication of effort.*' OECD.

other awards working on similar topics, although we found few tangible examples of this influencing practice at the award level – potentially an area that could be strengthened.

- Most awards in our sample were less advanced in their thinking on coherence when compared to relevance, and most award holders had not actively engaged with other (GCRF or non-GCRF) initiatives to inform research design and activities. Very few had conducted a formal or systematic mapping of stakeholders to help identify synergies and overlaps, and in most cases coherence was achieved in large part through formal project partnerships rather than external collaborations (although the distinction between the two is not always clear-cut). Workshops, conferences, working groups, external networks and other formal events were key mechanisms for award holders to engage informally with other stakeholders and identify opportunities for coherence; however, there was usually limited detail on how these had tangibly influenced awards – an issue that it will be important to follow up in future stages of the evaluation. Topic modelling suggests that there are distinct clusters of awards covering similar issues in the same country or region, but limited evidence that award holders across different programmes and DPs are encouraged to connect with one another. This suggests there is potential for greater coherence across GCRF awards covering similar topics within specific geographical areas.

3.2.1 Coherence at the global and programme level

There has been less explicit thinking on coherence within GCRF when compared to relevance.

The GCRF strategy references coherence, stating that '*GCRF will look to develop strategic relationships with key partner organisations in developed and developing countries, to ensure complementarity and avoid duplication, and explore, where appropriate, opportunities for joint or aligned activities*', specifically mentioning '*other UK and multinational, public and philanthropic organisations, and the delivery partners' global network of peer organisations; including National Academies, RCUK overseas offices, the Science and Innovation Network and DFID in-country offices*.'[71] It does not reference coherence to other national initiatives, for example government or civil society-led policies and programmes.

Interviews typically indicated that '*relevance was more of a priority*' and more deliberately considered than coherence, and that thinking on coherence was generally less well developed within the Fund.[72]

> *That need for coherence is [now] recognised much more broadly globally*
> *[…] Coherence is the main challenge. (BEIS stakeholder, DP66)*

There was generally no explicit mention of or requirement for either internal or external coherence in proposal or reporting processes beyond requiring Southern partnerships and stakeholder engagement. While relevance is incorporated into application criteria, linked to ODA eligibility and relevance to the SDGs and call themes, in the call documents we reviewed for awards in our sample there were no equivalent criteria for coherence. One exception is within the Collective Programme, where academics are expected to show how they are coordinating, and coherence is considered in funding decisions by considering how the award

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[71] BEIS, 'UK Strategy for the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF)'.

[72] Interviews RG14, DP1.

fits with the broader portfolio.[73] However, while relevance is explicitly considered by panels, coherence is less of an explicit consideration beyond the assessment of partnerships.

Since the ICAI review there have been advances in central governance structures and efforts to ensure cross-HMG R&D coherence – although we found few indications that these have tangibly impacted decision making within GCRF.

The ICAI review found that '*coordination across UK ODA-funded research instruments has remained light and informal*', and pointed out that there was no standing coordination structure to help ensure cross-government coherence.[74]

The HMG Strategic Coherence of ODA-funded Research (SCOR) Board was subsequently established in December 2017 to help better coordinate ODA flows across DFID, the Department of Health, BEIS and UKRI. The SCOR Board acts as the governance body for the UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR), which aims to accelerate progress towards the SDGs by '*ensuring greater coherence and shared accountability among its members*.'[75] It has an explicit mandate to provide coherence and help avoid duplication and fill gaps. A review of SCOR Board summary meeting minutes suggests that the Board has played an active role in relation to cross-HMG R&D coherence – for example identifying and commissioning research on particular strategic issues and adopting a new UKCDR strategy in 2018 that emphasises the importance of joint action, targeting research investments and coherent priority setting across HMG.[76] However, we did not find any evidence on how this has factored into thinking specifically within GCRF.

A new Research and Development Roadmap published by HMG in July 2020 commits to: '*a systematic and consultative view of research priorities, ensuring that public funding is not spread thinly across multiple funding schemes and that truly transformative opportunities are not missed*.'[77] One of its ambitions is to '*increase clarity and coherence*' in public R&D funding through ensuring the right incentives for institutions to collaborate and mapping the UK's R&I institutions to '*identify potential synergies*' and the opportunity for stronger links. Again, we did not find any evidence on whether or how this roadmap has affected thinking or practice within GCRF thus far.

UKRI and the Challenge Leaders play an important role in driving coherence, helping to identify synergies and improve dialogue between awards, although impact beyond the Research Councils is less clear.

UKRI was viewed as an important driver of both internal and external coherence across the Research Councils. UKRI leads or oversees several efforts to improve coherence both within GCRF and between GCRF and other relevant initiatives, frequently with the support of the Challenge Leaders. These include:

- Global Engagement Meetings, initiated in 2017. Participants include researchers from the UK and LMICs as well as international development funding agencies; the aims are to promote collaboration and maximise the contribution of GCRF research to policy and practice.
- The UKRI coordination group – this has representatives from every UKRI DP, and meets monthly. This group has developed a roadmap to identify priorities and strategies for working together.

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[73] Interview RG19.

[74] ICAI, 'Global Challenges Research Fund: A Rapid Review'.

[75] UKCDR, 'UKCDR Strategy (2018-2022)', 2018.

[76] UKCDR, 'Strategic Coherence of ODA-Funded Research (SCOR) Board: SCOR Board Updates', accessed February 15, 2021. Available at: https://www.ukcdr.org.uk/about-us/our-governance/

[77] HMG, 'UK Research and Development Roadmap', 2020.

- UKRI has recently formalised relationships with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) with the aim of tapping into their in-country networks and collaborations with policymakers and identifying joint strategic priorities – this relationship has been supported by the Challenge Leaders.
- Within the UKRI challenge portfolios, formal and informal landscaping was conducted, including with other international donors working in the space, to inform strategies and map priorities. One stakeholder felt that portfolio themes have helped to cluster investments and support projects to network with one another.[78] For example, within the urban portfolio there are plans to bring together a 'cities funders forum' to bring international donors together to support improved coherence.

One of the key roles of the Challenge Leaders is to support coherence within GCRF and externally, to help coordinate and identify synergies and also ensure GCRF is not replicating other work. Coherence was reported to be a '*major consideration*', particularly when designing the Collective Programme.[79] As with relevance, Challenge Leaders help ensure coherence through their existing networks with external organisations and their knowledge of other initiatives overlapping with the topic of a particular theme or call. They have, reportedly, been instrumental in building dialogue between Research Councils, helping to overcome silos, including through the cross-council working group. They also have ongoing conversations with other funders and organisations '*to monitor what they do and make sure GCRF doesn't replicate their work*'.[80] For example, the relevant Challenge Leaders and Managers are currently considering how GCRF's work on climate risks and vulnerability can be aligned against evolving COP26[81] priorities. A Cohort Building Strategy also began in October 2020 within the conflict and security portfolio, in order to align awards geographically and bring together thematic groups to '*prevent overlaps and encourage collaborations*'.[82] This involved bringing together award holders – including co-investigators – but also NGOs and think tanks through a series of events.

> *We did a lot of identification of overlaps, intersections, gaps […] to see if we could facilitate knowledge exchange […] with somebody whose interest overlaps with ours. Intersections are useful for getting people on board, either to be on a panel [or to pursue] a collaboration. We also identified gaps through engaging with people who are working towards similar outcomes around the SDGs. (Challenge Leader)*

However, as noted above in section 3.1.1, these efforts are predominantly limited to UKRI, and the Challenge Leaders have had less influence on coherence beyond the Research Councils. The Management Review found evidence of 'silos' within the GCRF portfolio, with good networks within UKRI and between the Academies but less effective coherence across these two groups or with other DPs.

As with relevance, some large-scale GCRF programmes have considered coherence more systematically in recent years.

Programmes have taken a variety of approaches, including building in formal mechanisms to identify synergies and avoid duplication of effort, incorporating reporting requirements on coordination and coherence, and conducting landscaping and mapping activities to cluster

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[78] Interview DP34.

[79] Interview RG16.

[80] Interview RG19.

[81] COP is the annual United Nations Climate Change conference. COP26 took place in 2021.

[82] Interview RG16.

investments and identify gaps. However, these approaches appear to be less common outside of large flagship GCRF programmes.

- Within the **UKSA IPP**, the M&E strategy was updated in 2020 to include the new OECD/DAC criteria for coherence. There are also various mechanisms within IPP to help avoid duplication of effort, including the 'discovery phase' incorporated into the latest round of projects, incorporating political economy analysis to enable award holders to understand the context, the needs of stakeholders, and what else is happening, in order to '*complement and not compete.*'[83] FCDO in-country teams comment on applications and provide information about similar projects. Stakeholders also referenced IPP's growing number of partnerships with other international space sector organisations as well as government ministries, which, reportedly, helps ensure funded projects complement other initiatives.

- The **Interdisciplinary Research Hub** 2019 reporting guidelines include the requirement to demonstrate integration and coordination with other GCRF projects and how global network development is proceeding.[84]

- Reportedly, the Resilient Cities and Infrastructure call within **Resilient Futures** facilitated building the urban challenge portfolio, helping to draw in a wider range of researchers from within GCRF, and improving links between the British Academy and the Science and Engineering Research Council as a result.

- Within the UKRI **Collective Programme**, the mapping exercise described in section 3.1.1 helped understand the landscape of challenges and gaps in existing research.

Networking calls offer more targeted opportunities to improve coherence within and beyond GCRF.

Networking calls are an important mechanism within GCRF for promoting coherence at the programme and award level through encouraging interdisciplinary collaborations between academic and non-academic stakeholders and between GCRF and non-GCRF stakeholders. For example, the **Frontiers of Development symposia programme** (delivered by the Royal Academy of Engineering within Resilient Futures) brings together early- to mid-career participants from engineering, medical, social and natural science backgrounds across industry, academia, government and NGOs with the aim of facilitating the transfer of new techniques and approaches across different fields and encouraging collaborative work. Seed funding is available to symposium participants to support interdisciplinary pilot research with the aim to facilitate national or international interdisciplinary collaborations between attendees of the symposium that address global challenges. There have also been three **'Network Plus' calls** within the Collective Programme, which support cross-institutional work bringing together academic and non-academic partners and which were described as some of the most '*significant and inspiring*' work seen by one Challenge Leader. Finally, the **GCRF Challenge Cluster call** aims to '*stimulate and support the coherent clustering of GCRF and non-GCRF projects and actors to achieve greater impact*.' The guidance is to include non-academic partners and other development projects.

Programme-level workshops and networking events offer opportunities for identifying synergies and opportunities for collaboration between award holders – although we found few tangible examples of this influencing practice at the award level.

One of the key activities of the Challenge Leaders has been organising workshops bringing together GCRF award holders and other stakeholders, which offer important opportunities for improving coherence through building contextual understanding and identifying synergies.

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[83] Interview DP1.

[84] UKRI, 'Interdisciplinary Research Hubs Reporting Guidance'.

One Challenge Leader oversaw a high-profile symposium on affordable housing in Kenya as an offshoot of the Collective Programme, bringing together a variety of UK actors – including the Newton Fund, BEIS, DFID and FCO – with Kenya parties to consider affordable housing in relation to Kenyan priorities, which, reportedly, strengthened UK-Kenya relationships. This event was flagged by the SCOR Board as a '*great model for future engagement*.'[85] Reportedly, it led to partnerships which have been funded by GCRF and others and informed the Cities call within the Collective Programme in collaboration with Kenyan policymakers.[86]

Several award holders referenced programme-level workshops and networking events, offering opportunities to connect with other awards working on similar topics. For example, Hub Cohort meetings bring together representatives from across the Hubs; the Royal Academy of Engineering organises roundtables for its awards on specific thematic areas; and IPP Open Days were seen as a good mechanism for supporting networking between IPP projects. However, although these events were generally appreciated by award holders, we found few tangible examples of them generating formal connections or collaborations and thus supporting internal coherence within GCRF (with the exception of a Future Leaders African Independent Research (FLAIR) fellow and Africa Prize for Engineering award winner, who had gained personal contacts they were hoping to collaborate with in future). Some award holders felt these forums were more a space to share lessons learned rather than influence the direction of their research through forging new synergies or partnerships.[87]

3.2.2 Coherence at the award level

Topic modelling suggests there is potential for greater internal coherence across GCRF awards covering similar topics within specific geographical areas.

Topic modelling was conducted, using country and region keywords, to highlight where research on specific topics is happening within the GCRF portfolio (see Annex 3). These maps highlight considerable diversity but also some distinct clusters of awards covering similar issues in the same country or region – for example, there are large clusters of awards on peace, violence and civil society in Uganda and on water, environment and climate in Ethiopia and Kenya. There is limited evidence from the global or regional analysis to suggest that award holders from across different programmes and DPs are supported to engage with other GCRF researchers working on similar topics in similar areas, implying that GCRF is funding clusters of related awards that are not linking up with one another. This may be a missed opportunity to encourage awards to work together in order to identify synergies and amplify results.

Most awards in our sample were aware of potential interconnections and overlaps with other initiatives, but had not actively engaged with these initiatives to inform research design and activities.

Of the awards, 15 were scored as 'developing' in relation to coherence, while nine scored 'good' or 'exemplary'. This reflects the fact that most of the awards included in our sample had done relatively little thinking on either internal or external coherence. While two award holders explicitly said that coherence was an important consideration for them to avoid duplication of efforts and ensure their research was feeding into other work and initiatives,[88] many awards had not considered potential interconnections or synergies with other initiatives (GCRF or non-GCRF) beyond the immediate connections of investigators.[89] Some felt that

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[85] UKCDR, 'SCOR Board Meeting Discussion Highlights: May 2019', 2019. Available at: https://www.ukcdr.org.uk/resource/scor-board-meeting-discussion-highlights-may-2019/

[86] Interview RG15.

[87] Awards 7, 15, 26.

[88] Awards 10, 12

[89] Awards 6, 11, 13, 24

because their projects were 'unique' or addressing a specific research gap, there were no other relevant initiatives to engage with,[90] suggesting potential gaps in how coherence is understood by some award holders.

Most awards had engaged in some way with non-academic actors, which often helped drive coherence – although the extent of engagement varied considerably (see Box 7 above).

Figure 3: Coherence judgements
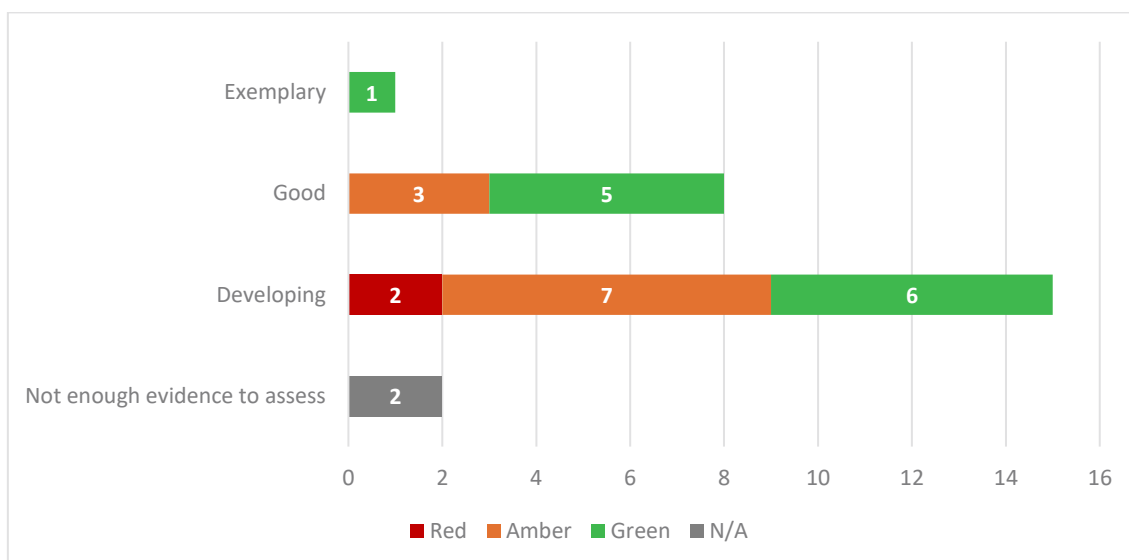
Red = low confidence in the evidence (only one source – interview or document – or very low-detail/low quality evidence from multiple sources). Amber = medium confidence in the evidence (two sources with a sufficient degree of detail). Green = high confidence in the evidence (3+ sources with a good degree of detail).

Very few award holders conducted a formal or systematic mapping of stakeholders to help identify synergies and overlaps.

Some award holders had explicitly mapped out other relevant non-GCRF stakeholders, policies and programmes and used this to help identify research problems and gaps where other organisations were not already working as well as potential partnerships.[91] In some cases this involved a formal stakeholder or 'gap analysis'[92] or snowballing techniques to ensure all the relevant stakeholders were involved.[93] However, these awards were in the minority.

> *As soon as we had the award, I spent two weeks visiting other stakeholders – I went round all the other offices who might want to know about what we are doing – included Foreign Office, FCDO, head of DFID, conflict groups, DFID resource group, United States Agency for International Development, other EU officials, local NGOs, foundations […] We used a snowballing technique to identify new people to meet and ended up with 30 different groups to attend a meeting. (PI, Award 26)*

As with needs assessments (discussed in section 3.2.2), some award holders felt there was limited time or budget to do landscape scoping or pursue collaborations.[94] None of the awards had made connections or synergies with high-profile initiatives identified in our contextual

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[90] Awards 1, 7, 11, 15, 22, 32

[91] Awards 4, 5, 8, 17 20, 24, 26.

[92] Award 25.

[93] Award 26.

[94] Awards 8, 16.

analysis – although the contextual analysis was relatively high-level and light touch and will not have identified all relevant initiatives.

In most cases, coherence was achieved in large part through formal project partnerships rather than external collaborations.

Although rarely described in these terms, it was clear that Southern partnerships were purposefully pursued in part for their potential to help ensure external coherence. Partners were often responsible for ensuring that other relevant local stakeholders were engaged, avoiding potential duplication of efforts, and generating linkages into government, civil society and communities.[95] It was not always easy to distinguish official partners from external collaborations – a UKRI stakeholder pointed out that the distinction between formal and non-formal partners is '*not always clear-cut and it changes from call to call.*'[96] In some cases initial stakeholder consultation and scoping led to stakeholders subsequently being brought into the project as formal partners.[97]

> *We mainly relied on partnerships and built on these. Both [Co-Is] have extensive networks and ongoing dialogues and policy networks. They have an existing engagement in legal reforms, and we tapped into what they were already doing. (PI, Award 24)*

Non-academic partners were often mentioned as an important factor in ensuring coherence – for example industrial or civil society partners who provided a route into research application to achieve development outcomes.[98] Awards with a strong networking component typically engaged large and diverse sets of network participants by design, in some cases spanning government, NGOs and the private sector.[99] In some cases, significant time and effort had been invested into identifying relevant network partners and expanding and diversifying networks over time.

One award holder pointed out that GCRF financial requirements – which prohibit government entities from receiving funds – inhibited formal partnership with government ministries or quasi-state entities, which restricted opportunities for deep collaboration.[100] This resonates with insights from the Fairness module, which found that administrative requirements within GCRF can act as a barrier to Southern partnerships.

Three awards had formal governing advisory bodies which helped ensure coherence. These committees – sometimes national, sometimes international – ensured inputs from a range of relevant stakeholders, including government authorities, service providers and international and national development organisations. Reportedly, they helped to facilitate access and linkages to other relevant experts and initiatives to support engagement and impact; in some cases involving experts from other countries was used as a way to seek to influence policy internationally.[101]

Award-level workshops, conferences, working groups, external networks and other formal events were key mechanisms for engaging with other stakeholders and identifying opportunities for external coherence.

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[95] Awards 11, 12, 15, 18, 19, 24, 25, 26.

[96] Interview DP66 & 82.

[97] Awards 5, 8, 17.

[98] Awards 1, 7, 9, 18.

[99] Awards 5, 10.

[100] Award 10.

[101] Awards 13, 17.

A small number of awards had, or were pursuing, formal collaborations with organisations who were not part of the award[102] – these often stemmed from other research projects the investigators were involved in. However, in most cases award-level conversations, meetings, workshops, events, etc. offered more informal opportunities to engage external actors, share lessons and experiences, help scope out research needs and gaps (as discussed in section 3.1.2), and identify potential interlinkages, although in most cases the details were vague.[103] In some awards, workshops had led to formal partnerships or potential future collaborations with non-academic stakeholders, but these were in the minority.[104]

> *Beyond formal academic partners, we've had collaborations with community organisations [but] there isn't formal agreement between our partners and them. Rather, they are ports of call. (PI, Award 4)*

Other award holders mentioned deliberate participation in national and international conferences as an important mechanism for identifying potential partnerships and ensuring coherence with other complementary work.[105] One respondent reported that this has helped to develop their award into a global network, build strong international relationships and ensure global perspectives on the topic are incorporated.[106] Formal participation of project partners in other related networks or working groups (this engagement tended to pre-date GCRF funding) is another mechanism for supporting coherence.[107]

> *We participate in [another network's] meetings, to see how they are doing and give them more information on [the award], so we can work in a complementary fashion and not duplicate efforts. From time to time, we invite them to come over to our network meetings. We are looking at [their processes] so that within our programme we can provide a platform, a service that makes their process [easier]. (PI, Award 12)*

Box 8. Achieving coherence through extensive partnerships and government engagement: The South Asian Nitrogen Hub

The South Asian Nitrogen Hub promotes R&I on nitrogen management in South Asia. It aims to contribute to the SDGs by ensuring sustained food systems and better adaptation to climate change. At the global level, the Hub has aligned its objectives with the sub-sector goals pursued by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and other environmental initiatives, including the Global Environment Facility, especially relating to nitrogen management and pollution. Its focus in South Asia builds on an observed political window of opportunity to address nitrogen management, for example by a statement by the Indian Prime Minister in 2017 on reducing the use of chemical fertiliser.

The PI and Co-Is are well established figures in the global nitrogen research ecosystem and are well connected to or run global bodies such as the International Nitrogen Initiative (INI), the International Nitrogen Management System (INMS) and the South Asian Nitrogen Centre (SANC). The Hub's partnerships emerged out of work on the INI, an international programme set up in 2003 which works at a global scale and through UNEP. The Hub is also embedded in the INMS (Towards the Establishment of an International Nitrogen Management System) project. The consortium

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[102] Awards 4, 22, 11.

[103] Awards 1, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 24, 26.

[104] Awards 11, 21.

[105] Awards 11, 12, 14.

[106] Award 11.

[107] Award 12, 16.

covers all eight countries in the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP). Links between these various bodies allow the Hub to connect and coordinate with other global initiatives.

At the pre-proposal stage, SANC organised regional consultation meetings involving the nitrogen communities in each country. This ensured that key stakeholders, particularly relevant government bodies, had the opportunity to contribute. The Hub actively works to coordinate with stakeholders on four levels: policymakers (particularly through SACEP), villages, civil society and business forums.

The Hub has specifically targeted government bodies, particularly in India and Sri Lanka, to take the nitrogen management agenda forward. Flexibility in activities and budget allocations has allowed the Hub to support coherence with emerging policy priorities nationally and regionally – for example supporting the Government of Sri Lanka to bring together nitrogen scientists and government agencies from South Asia, leading to the Colombo Declaration 2019 (an ambition to halve nitrogen waste by 2030, signed by more than 30 countries).[108] The Hub also supported the Government of India to put together a resolution on sustainable nitrogen management to the UN Environment Assembly in 2019.[109]

3.3 Covid-19

This section considers how far GCRF has been able to adapt to support the global response to Covid-19.

At the programme level, GCRF has created opportunities for researchers to respond to Covid-19.

As found in the Management Review, there are signs of strategic agility within GCRF in response to Covid-19. Across the five programmes we looked at, flexibility was shown to award holders in relation to budget spend, with many no-cost extensions issued in response to delays in activities. In some cases (e.g. the Resilient Futures programme), advice was also provided on remote working.

There were also specific opportunities developed to respond to the pandemic. For example, the Agile Response Call drew on Challenge Leaders as peer reviewers to help ensure relevance. The Accelerate Hub led a rapid collaboration between five international agencies to develop evidence-based resources for parents during the lockdown, which were shared internationally by agencies and governments to '*several million families in over 150 countries*.'[110] While these examples demonstrate responsiveness and adaptability to evolving global challenges, the evaluation did not consider these calls in-depth at this stage and so is unable to make a judgement on their relevance to the pandemic response.

Hubs and GROW awards were given the opportunity to secure funding to refocus and adapt their objectives in light of Covid, but it was reported that none of the Hubs took up this opportunity and it is unclear how far the opportunity was taken up within GROW – reportedly, most adaptations were logistical rather than technical. Similarly, the Collective Programme PIs were told they could pivot to respond to Covid-related issues where appropriate.

Few of the awards in our sample had adapted in substantial ways in response to the pandemic, although there are several examples of minor technical adaptations to research priorities or fields of enquiry.

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[108] UNEP, 'Colombo Declaration Calls for Tackling Global Nitrogen Challenge', 2019. Available at: https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/colombo-declaration-calls-tackling-global-nitrogen-challenge

[109] UNEP, 'United Nations Environment Assembly of the United Nations Environment Programme: Sustainable Nitrogen Management', 2019. Available at: https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/39816/SUSTAINABLE%20NITROGEN%20MANAGEMENT.%20English.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

[110] Accelerate Hub, 'Accelerate Hub Covid-19 Response', 2020. Available at: https://www.acceleratehub.org/covid-19-response

In most cases, adaptations were purely logistical, with activities delayed or adapted to adjust to remote working.[111] One DP stakeholder reflected that projects that are more decentralised and with stronger partnerships have faced fewer delays, with in-country activities being led by partners, whereas more 'autocratic' projects have struggled more and some have delayed start dates.[112]

Several awards had adjusted or added research questions or new lines of enquiry to investigate issues relating to the pandemic.[113] For instance, one award was collecting atmospheric data to understand the difference lockdowns made to pollution,[114] while another had added a new strand on media representation and was also attempting to monitor the impact of Covid on the challenge under investigation.[115] Another had adjusted the methodology in order to investigate the link between the award topic and immunisation programmes.[116]

> *Covid has given new ways to add more scope into the project. We are beginning to account for the problems that farmers or retailers are facing in a pandemic situation and trying to include that into the research. This will not shift the priority of the research because Covid is not a perennial issue; however, these uncertainties will be taken into account. (PI, Award 25)*

Other awards had incorporated new sources of data – for example placing more emphasis on digital data sources and introducing new methodologies such as participant diaries and micro-narratives.[117]

Two grantees reported that their award was too small to build in substantial new components to look at new challenges relating to Covid without abandoning existing research activities.[118] One had applied for additional funding to support a new stream of work relating to the pandemic.

In many cases the pandemic has restricted stakeholder engagement, with potential implications for relevance and coherence, although there are a few more positive stories around the greater inclusivity of virtual activities.

In several cases stakeholder engagement activities were simply delayed or cancelled, and it was not always clear whether they would be rescheduled in future.[119] However, there were some good examples of awards shifting to virtual interaction, for example developing new means of sharing information through websites or online training, or combining virtual and in-person engagement.[120] Some felt this had been an important learning experience, and in some cases it had improved participation due to lower costs or had allowed stakeholders with other commitments to attend.[121]

The Fairness module highlights that Covid-19 opened the way to more equal distribution of roles and responsibilities between Northern and Southern partners, often translating into a

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[111] Awards 7, 16, 18, 22, 24.

[112] Interview RC16.

[113] Awards 4, 5, 10, 11, 12, 17, 22, 25.

[114] Award 10.

[115] Award 11.

[116] Award 15.

[117] Awards 4, 11, 15, 16, 22.

[118] Awards 12, 22.

[119] Awards 9, 14, 17, 22, 24.

[120] Awards 5, 7, 9, 10.

[121] Awards 7, 9, 10.

more meaningful role for Southern partners and enabling partners to attend online workshops and conferences who otherwise would not have had the budget to travel. This was echoed in the Relevance module – for example, one award holder reflected that Covid had been an opportunity for local researchers to take on more responsibility and be more '*in the driving seat*', contributing to a greater recognition that research on Kenyan issues should be driven by national research institutions.[122] This potential for greater inclusion was reflected at the programme level too – a Resilient Futures respondent reported that remote panel activities made diverse participation easier and made it more likely to incorporate international representation. This has the potential to help improve relevance and coherence as well as fairness, given the central importance of Southern partners to facilitating stakeholder engagement and bringing in a consideration of local needs and priorities.

> **Box 9. Adjusting research questions and methods in response to Covid: the Politics of Hope**
>
> The 'Politics of Hope' research project aimed to investigate how hope is experienced, interpreted and understood among socially excluded people in the UK, France and the Indian State of Maharashtra through ethnographically documenting people's experiences.
>
> The research project was flexible enough to reassess research plans and questions within the context of Covid-19. Research questions were adjusted, as '*we could no longer talk about hope in an abstract sense, we had to really situate it against the disaster that had been wreaked on so many of these communities in the context of Covid.*' The pandemic also highlighted the crucial role of civil society organisations in supporting and helping people. The proposal had focused much more on formal state structures, but Covid '*shook that up – it actually shattered it […] it taught us to think about the questions in a more critical way and to think about the importance of civil society organisations.*'
>
> While the award made traditional ethnography impossible, the project shifted to incorporate additional digital data sources, and also incorporated written diaries from participants to capture the frustrations and hope that people were living with. '*This was a very new source of data that we had not even considered before.*'

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[122] Award 26.

4 Conclusion

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

To what extent and why are GCRF and its components consistent with and responsive to target groups' needs, SDG priorities and partners' and funders'/donors' policies (global, regional, national and subnational)? In essence, is GCRF funding the right things?

Overall, the evidence suggests that GCRF is largely succeeding in funding relevant research that responds to development needs and priorities and there have been improvements over time, with the introduction of new structures and processes at the portfolio and programme levels. However, while there are pockets of good practice, approaches to ensuring relevance are not systematically applied across the GCRF portfolio.

Most of the awards in our sample clearly demonstrated relevance to an important local priority, a key development policy or strategy, or an emerging area of some significance. Awards demonstrated relevance in a wide variety of ways, including through generating innovation, responding to recognised priorities or urgent needs, providing interdisciplinary insights, building local capacity and generating lessons and insights that could apply more broadly beyond the areas of focus. Award holders had generally considered relevance in some detail, as the proposal process required applicants to demonstrate ODA contribution and describe how their award would respond to the SDGs and achieve development impact. Proposal processes and funding criteria are rigorous, building on existing DP selection processes, and involve clear and deliberate assessment of award relevance to achieving global and regional/national priorities. Assessment criteria, panels and interviews provide opportunities to consider how research will respond to local contexts, and GCRF has improved the diversity of panellists to ensure greater representation of experts from LMICs over time – although the broad geographical scope of GCRF makes it difficult to ensure panels contain experts with local contextual knowledge for all awards. DPs also face the challenge of ensuring relevance is maintained after the proposal stage over the lifespan of the project. While large flagship programmes such as the Hubs and UKSA IPP have detailed reporting processes in place, most DPs do not require award holders to demonstrate the continued relevance of their awards to global or national priorities.

In most cases, the starting point for ensuring relevance within awards was the existing personal and professional experience and knowledge of the investigators, as well as the pre-existing partnerships in focal countries or regions. While this is undoubtedly important, it misses opportunities to ensure research is shaped by a broader coalition of stakeholders from the outset. Although award holders frequently consulted partners and other academics to inform research design, there were fewer examples of meaningful consultation with service providers, industry, NGOs, service providers and other stakeholders. In particular, there was limited evidence of community-level engagement to identify needs and priorities at the award design stage, although this report highlights some example of good practice (see Boxes 6 and 7).

Strong partnerships (which frequently predated GCRF) are a key cornerstone of relevance across the Fund, with partners often the conduit to engaging broader coalitions of stakeholders in the focal country or region. This suggests that having the right array of partners is essential to ensuring research is relevant to local needs and priorities, which creates challenges in cases where partners are not deeply embedded or well connected to

relevant stakeholders. There is potentially some tension between (i) awards' reliance on pre-existing partnerships to support relevance and stakeholder engagement and (ii) the drive to improve inclusivity and expand the range of researchers and institutions receiving GCRF funding. This will be important to consider in future stages of the evaluation.

In most cases award holders did not conduct formal needs assessments – and where they did, these were frequently conducted prior to the GCRF proposal process, as part of previous research grants. Short time frames for application processes place limitations on meaningful pre-proposal scoping or the formation of new collaborative partnerships, potentially hindering relevance at the award level. While some of the large flagship programmes and calls (such as the Interdisciplinary Research Hubs) used more in-depth and extensive proposal processes, allowing time for applicants to build networks and co-design proposals with broader stakeholders, these approaches are not applied systematically across the Fund.

While SDGs are useful as a high-level framing and communications device, ambiguity in how awards are categorised against SDG and Challenge Areas makes it difficult to draw conclusions on the overall relevance of the Fund to specific themes or topics. The SDGs are very broad, and in practice applicants frequently link their awards to multiple goals – unsurprisingly, given GCRF's focus on interdisciplinary research. The 12 Challenge Areas appear to be less well used and understood beyond the Challenge Leaders and Collective Programme, and most of the award holders interviewed for this module were unfamiliar with them. This raises questions about how meaningful the classification of awards to SDGs and Challenge Areas is in all cases, especially as topic modelling shows considerable diversity in how specific topics are categorised. This makes it difficult to draw any overarching conclusions on the relevance of the GCRF portfolio to addressing specific SDGs or Challenge Areas.

On a global level, GCRF has made efforts to improve its strategic focus on global challenges since the ICAI review in 2017, although there are still important gaps. The establishment of six challenge portfolios and the appointment of Challenge Leaders are steps towards ensuring greater relevance at Fund level, although these mechanisms are still very UKRI-centric. The next phase of the evaluation will take a deeper look at the Challenge Leader structure and its implementation, to identify further lessons. There has been some advance in GCRF governance structures to improve strategic oversight and interlinkages with other HMG investments, but decision making on detailed priorities and areas of focus still appears to sit very much with UKRI and DPs. Some recent large-scale programmes have taken a more systematic approach to ensuring relevance through more deliberate programme-level scoping work or more in-depth award-level processes to support award holders to map the landscape or co-design areas of focus with partners, but these approaches are not systematically applied across the Fund.

GCRF's broad geographical scope is one of its unique features, but there is a trade-off between incorporating a diversity of research and ensuring that funded work is relevant to national needs and priorities. GCRF's geographical diversity makes it more difficult for DPs to understand issues in-depth during call-level scoping work or to ensure that panellists are included from the geographical areas covered by grantees in order to bring their contextual knowledge to the assessment process. There is no simple solution to this trade-off, and it should be considered more deliberately by GCRF. Approaches used in some programmes – for example the 'discovery phase' incorporated into the UKSA International Partnerships Programme to encourage award holders to formally examine and situate the award within the context – could, potentially, be applied more broadly.

To what extent and why is the GCRF portfolio coherent with, aligned to and coordinated with other global, regional and national efforts to achieve the SDGs and address development challenges?

Overall, at Fund, programme and award level, thinking on coherence was typically less well developed than thinking on relevance, although there have been improvements over time.

Most awards in our sample were aware of potential interconnections and overlaps with other initiatives, but had not engaged actively with these initiatives to inform research design and activities. Many awards had not considered potential interconnections or synergies with other initiatives – beyond the immediate connections of investigators. Unlike relevance, there was generally no explicit requirement for coherence in proposal or reporting processes beyond high-level requirements for Southern partnerships and (in some cases) stakeholder engagement. At the global level, there have been some advances in central governance structures and efforts to ensure cross-HMG coherence since the ICAI review in 2017 – for example, the SCOR Board has an explicit mandate to support coherence and avoid duplication across HMG-funded programmes, while the new HMG Research and Development Roadmap explicitly aims to improve clarity and coherence in public R&D funding. However, we did not find much evidence on how either has factored into thinking specifically within GCRF.

As with relevance, in most cases coherence was pursued by awards largely through formal project partnerships rather than external collaborations. Southern partnerships were often purposefully pursued in part for their potential to help ensure coherence – with partners responsible for ensuring that other relevant local stakeholders were engaged, avoiding potential duplication of efforts, and generating linkages into government, civil society and communities. Workshops, conferences, working groups, external networks and other formal events were key mechanisms for award holders to engage informally with other stakeholders, although the details on the precise nature of these collaborations was often limited and these engagements had rarely led to formal collaborations. In the GCRF ToC we anticipate that for GCRF to have an impact there needs to be coherence across awards to enable scaling-up and amplification of outcomes. However, although topic modelling suggests there are distinct clusters of awards covering similar issues in the same country or region, there is no evidence to suggest that award holders are supported to engage with other GCRF researchers working on similar topics across DPs or programmes. There is potential for greater coherence across GCRF awards covering similar topics within specific geographical areas.

UKRI plays an important role in driving coherence within and beyond GCRF, particularly through the Challenge Leaders, who are viewed as having improved coherence across UKRI-funded research. They have brought their existing networks and deep sectoral knowledge to help build more coherent portfolios of research and improve dialogue across the Research Councils, with some clear examples of success. A landscaping exercise was used to inform strategies and priorities across the challenge portfolios, and there are some signs of collaboration between Research Councils and Academies, for example in the development of the urban portfolio. However, there is significant reliance on Challenge Leaders' own networks, with questions around whether a small number of individuals are sufficient to ensure coherence across a fund of GCRF's size, and interconnections across the Fund as a whole are still underdeveloped.

As with relevance, some large-scale GCRF programmes have considered coherence more systematically in recent years – for instance the UKSA IPP, which has incorporated requirements for political economy analysis into project design stages. Networking and cluster calls offer more targeted opportunities to improve coherence within and beyond GCRF, including the 'Network Plus' calls within the Collective Programme, which support cross-institutional work, bringing together academic and non-academic partners. Programme-level workshops and networking events offer opportunities for identifying synergies and opportunities for collaboration between award holders – although we found few tangible examples of this influencing practice at the award level. Some award holders felt these forums

were more a space to share lessons learned rather than to influence the direction of their research through forging new synergies or partnerships.

To what extent has GCRF been able to coordinate and align with other global efforts to respond to Covid-19? To what extent has GCRF been able to adapt to support the global response to Covid-19?

Opportunities have been created for GCRF research to respond to Covid-19, although adaptations to existing projects in our sample were relatively minor. Although GCRF programmes have created opportunities for existing awards to respond to Covid-19, there was limited evidence within our sample that awards had adapted substantially in response to the pandemic beyond logistical adjustments to research activities. However, there are several examples of minor adaptations to research priorities or fields of enquiry – from introducing new research questions to incorporating new methods and sources of data. Particularly among smaller awards, there was a feeling that there was limited scope to build in substantial new components to consider challenges relating to the pandemic without abandoning ongoing research activities. This suggests it is likely that most innovation within GCRF in relation to the pandemic response exists within the Covid-specific calls issued in 2020, which were not a focus of this phase of the evaluation but will be important to consider in future phases.

In many cases the pandemic has restricted stakeholder engagement, with potential implications for relevance and coherence, although there are a few more positive stories around the greater inclusivity of virtual activities – for example improving participation through lowering costs and allowing stakeholders with other commitments to attend. There are also some indications that the pandemic may have helped promote more equitable partnerships through increased reliance on in-country partners – this would be an interesting issue to explore in future stages of the evaluation.

4.1 Recommendations

How can the relevance and coherence of GCRF be improved?

The findings from this review give rise to the following recommendations. These are designed to be formative and to appreciatively build on GCRF's work to date on improving relevance and coherence.

1. **Expand the work of the Challenge Leaders and challenge portfolios beyond UKRI**. The Challenge Leaders have played a valuable role in improving both relevance and coherence within programmes and awards that fall under UKRI. Similarly, the establishment of the challenge portfolios has helped bring together projects under a common framing and ensure thematically aligned investments are leveraged. While there are some linkages between Challenge Leaders and Academies, it does not appear that these functions expand systematically beyond UKRI at present. BEIS should consider how the work of the Challenge Leaders and portfolios could be expanded to encompass all DPs, or whether similar structures could be established elsewhere in the portfolio.

2. **Build coherence more explicitly into future application requirements and proposal processes**. A key driver of relevance is the proposal process, which requires GCRF applicants to justify how their awards comply with ODA requirements and to demonstrate how they will contribute to the SDGs and achieve development impact. Panel and interview processes are used to consider the relevance of awards, increasingly with the input of Southern experts. However, coherence is less of an explicit consideration within proposal processes, despite being a clear element of the GCRF strategy, and is an important prerequisite for research impact – in order to ensure that GCRF research builds on and leverages other efforts (both internal and external to the Fund) to achieve global challenges, as well as to avoid duplications. BEIS and DPs should consider whether calls

and application criteria can be strengthened to incorporate coherence as well as relevance. This should include requirements for stakeholder engagement *beyond* direct partners and the academic community. One excellent example is the Challenge Clusters call within the UKRI Collective Programme, which aimed to bring together current and former GCRF projects and partners to form new collaborations.

3. **Encourage and support award holders to formally consider relevance and coherence post-proposal stage.** Formal processes for considering relevance and coherence at the award level – for example needs assessments, stakeholder mapping or stakeholder co-creation activities – appear relatively rare, with consultations more typically happening informally through conversations and partner networks. GCRF could ensure a more systematic consideration of relevance and coherence at the award level if DPs provided guidance, time and resources for award holders to assess problems and gaps, build broad coalitions of partners beyond existing connections, and undertake stakeholder mapping or landscape analysis to understand how their award fits into the wider ecosystem of research. This could include more specific guidance on meaningful community-level engagement and co-creation of research priorities and findings with stakeholders other than formal partners and academic communities, both of which were highlighted as weaknesses in this review. There are several examples of good practice already within the Fund – for example the UKSA IPP 'Discovery Phase', which incorporates a political economy analysis step, and the establishment of formal advisory bodies by some award holders – that could be drawn on here.

4. **Build on existing workshop, symposia and networking opportunities to support coherence in a more systematic way, including within geographical topic clusters.** Programme-level workshops and networking events are common and offer opportunities for identifying synergies and opportunities for collaboration between award holders (internal coherence) and other non-GCRF actors (external coherence). However, we found few tangible examples of this influencing practice at the award level. It would be helpful for BEIS and DPs to consider how these activities could be better leveraged to encourage and support the identification of synergies and collaboration, both within GCRF awards and with external stakeholders. These activities could also be used more systematically to encourage award holders from across different programmes and DPs to engage with other GCRF researchers working on similar topics in similar areas; this does not appear to be common at present. This could support award holders to better leverage synergies and enable the scaling-up and amplification of results necessary for cross-Fund impact, as per the GCRF ToC.

5. **Consider how relevance and coherence 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 relevance and coherence post-proposal stage. There are good examples to build on within large programmes – for example the Interdisciplinary Research Hubs, which require award holders to demonstrate integration and coordination with other GCRF projects as well as the progress of global network development. It may be helpful for DPs to encourage award holders to document both the *processes* undertaken to support relevance and coherence (stakeholder consultation, co-creation, contextual analysis, etc.) and the *results* of these processes in terms of how they have informed research design and implementation.

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