

Global Challenges Research Fund: Growing Research Capability (GROW) Programme

Executive Summary

This summary presents findings from the 2021 process evaluation of the Global Challenges Research Fund's Growing Research Capability Programme.

The Global Challenges Research Fund is a £1.5 billion fund overseen by the UK Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. GCRF supports pioneering research and innovation that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries. The GCRF evaluation examines the fund's Theory of Change, from activities to impacts, over a five-year period running from 2020 to 2025. This process evaluation focused on the Growing Research Capability (GROW) programme, a GCRF 'signature investment' aimed at growing research capacities across the globe.

The evaluation found GROW has largely delivered on its vision to build capacities for interdisciplinary, challenge-led research. It did this through the development and strengthening of research partnerships, as well as through engagement with local stakeholders, breaking through silos between countries, disciplines and generations of researchers, and successfully building links between researchers and wider communities in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

GCRF evaluation: The purpose of GCRF's evaluation is to assess the extent to which GCRF has contributed to its objectives and impact. The overall GCRF evaluation takes a theory-based design, tracking the GCRF ToC over the life of the fund. The evaluation is

conducted over five years and across three stages. This report focuses on Stage 1b (2021–22), involving six process evaluations of GCRF's signature investments, including the GROW programme. It seeks to answer the overarching evaluation question: *How are GCRF's signature investments working, and what have they achieved?*

Overview of the GROW Programme: The call for this programme, launched by United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI) in 2016, had the primary aim to grow research capacities across the globe by strengthening capacities in developing countries, building and enhancing research collaborations, and increasing the engagement of the UK research base with development challenges.

A total of £225 million was invested in a portfolio of 37 projects ranging in value from £3 million to £8 million, involving over 60 countries and focusing on a wide range of challenge areas, e.g. inclusive education, conflict reduction and affordable sustainable energy. GROW awards were funded for four years (2017–21). Several of these projects received a three-month no-cost extension until March 2022 in order to compensate for delays due to Covid-19.

Evaluation findings

GROW's processes and structures are well aligned with the GCRF strategy and have supported challenge-led interdisciplinary research, particularly with strong practices to promote fairness of opportunity, process and benefits in partnerships with LMIC institutions; gender responsiveness could

have been more strongly supported from the programme level. (EQ 1)

GROW is well aligned with the GCRF strategy, and in particular it plays a key role in relation to the second strategic objective (*'Strengthen capacity for research, innovation and knowledge exchange in the UK and developing countries through partnership with excellent UK research and researchers'*). The framing of the GROW Funding Call closely reflects the programme's vision and ToC.

The governance and management structure of GROW awards appear generally adequate, although their specific configuration varies significantly across the portfolio, as does the level of human resources dedicated to management. Clearer and greater guidance from UKRI in a number of areas would have been welcomed by award holders.

Research collaborations between UK and Southern institutions were an essential requirement of the GROW call, as a key dimension to fulfil the programme's vision of growing research capabilities for challenge-led research. Across the portfolio, significant thought and effort have gone into promoting fairness in partnerships, in terms of opportunities, process and benefits. Overall, however, the evaluation found that short timescales for design and set up meant GROW awards tended towards nurturing already established Southern partnerships than creating new ones.

GROW has encouraged award holders to embrace interdisciplinary ways of working, including, in many cases, breaking silos between natural and social sciences. While the breadth and depth of interdisciplinary collaboration varies across the portfolio, many GROW academics spoke of their 'interdisciplinary learning journey' as one of the most valuable and unique features of the programme.

Gender responsiveness, namely integrating measures for promoting gender equality, appears generally low in most awards, with the exception of those where gender is an explicit focus of the research. In general, awards made an effort to ensure gender balance in the team and in governance

bodies, as well as in terms of panels for workshops and symposia. There is often, however, little reflection on how the development challenges tackled through the awards had different gender manifestations and implications.

GROW has been notably successful in delivering on its vision, with clear results in terms of strengthened research and innovation capacity in both LMICs and the UK, often going beyond academia to support local stakeholders' capacities. Wider impact of the programme on the research and innovation (R&I) ecosystem in the Global South needs further exploration in later stages of the evaluation. (EQ 2)

Capacity development was central to the GROW vision. The primary beneficiaries of capacity development were early career researchers (ECRs). ECR programmes were set up in different shapes across the portfolio, providing opportunities for exchanges, mentoring, training, collaboration, networking, and support for further funding. This focus on 'passing the baton to the next generation' was seen by many as the real value added of the programme. Although there was criticism that GROW awards tended to narrowly equate 'ECR' with a 'post-doc' role, which has minimal correspondence in Southern research contexts.

While most capacity development happened at an individual level, there are also interesting examples of projects building capacities of Southern institutions in specific areas.

Capacity development efforts have also gone beyond academia, with many awards working to build capacities of local stakeholders, including local communities. In these cases, ethical issues relating to engaging with local communities had to be carefully navigated and managed.

The GROW programme had a recognised impact on UK academia – changing modes of working and increasing the capacity of academics and their institution to conduct challenge-led interdisciplinary research for development impact. In this respect, engaging with local communities in ways

that were fair also played an important role in building the capacity of researchers (both UK and Southern partners) for 'doing research differently,' namely seeing the problem from the perspective of local communities and helping to overcome disciplinary siloes.

Overall, however, there has been little systematic reflection at the programme level on the impact of GROW on the overall research ecosystem in the Global South (beyond the institutions that are directly involved with the GROW awards). While the GROW Funding Call encouraged building 'new' partnerships as well as strengthening existing ones, a number of factors (primarily the limited time available at the application and set-up stage) have made GROW more conducive to nurturing a limited number of existing partnerships than to establishing new one. This has implications for contextual fairness, namely in terms of disproportionate capacity development support and funding going to a small proportion of organisations and researchers in the Global South.

Management and reporting processes generally appeared to be proportionate and not overly onerous, while more guidance on Value for Money (VfM) would have promoted a more consistent approach across the portfolio. (EQ 3)

Issues related to the management of finance, such as payment in arrears, posed a particular challenge for many Southern partner institutions.

No specific guidance was provided around assessing VfM, and awards generally followed their lead institution's procurement guidelines. As a result, the way in which VfM was understood and reported focused mostly on the dimensions of 'economy' and 'efficiency'. More reflection and guidance are needed on how to incorporate wider considerations of 'effectiveness' and 'equity' in assessing VfM of collaborative research projects.

GROW awards have made significant progress towards their intended impact, and have been able to successfully respond and adapt to the unexpected and unprecedented

challenges of Covid-19, thanks to a large extent to the flexibility provided by the funders. (EQ 4)

The GROW awards have a variety of different proposed pathways to impact – involving policy uptake, influencing practice and private investments, and providing direct benefits to local communities. Capacity development is an important component of all these pathways.

Covid-19 and related restrictions significantly affected the progress towards impact for all GROW awards. Thanks to leadership and the commitment of research teams, most awards were able to adapt their research methods and continue to progress towards their intended impact, albeit with inevitable delays. In some cases, GROW team members and partner institutions took on additional responsibilities (outside the project) to support their government's pandemic responses. UKRI was also responsive to the needs of the awards, for example with respect to requests for budgetary allocation changes. This flexibility was crucial for projects to continue to work during the pandemic.

However, the no-cost extension accorded to the awards to compensate for these delays was generally considered insufficient, and many award holders noted with disappointment that the projects were coming to an end just when impact was starting to show.

GROW awards have generally been successful in overcoming barriers (both contextual and project-related), thanks to funder flexibility, strong leadership, and the high level of commitment of research teams. (EQ 5)

For all awards, Covid-19 was the main barrier to achieving progress towards impact. Other challenges had to do with in-country political situations, environmental factors, and the mismatch between the programme requirements and the reality of Southern partner institutions, particularly around due diligence and financial management.

Funder flexibility was a key enabling factor for overcoming barriers and achieving impact. In general, respondents felt that UKRI had been responsive to the needs of the awards, allowing awards to adapt and respond to the impacts of Covid-19 and other contextual challenges. Commitment of the research team, strength of partnership and leadership were crucial enablers for impact.

GROW had several characteristics of 'uniqueness' in the current funding scenario, which align it well with GCRF vision and objectives. However, the funding cuts – and the way in which they were communicated – significantly affected some of the core features of GROW. (EQ 6)

There is a strong consensus among award holders that GROW is a unique programme in the current funding scene. Several Southern partners remarked that GCRF funding arrived at a time in which public funding in their countries was rapidly declining and that this type of funding for open-ended research would be difficult, and perhaps impossible, to replace.

GROW funding seemed to be 'the right size' – large enough to allow for ambitious research scope as well as time dedicated to building partnerships and stakeholder engagement, and yet still small enough to allow for working relations to develop into friendships.

In relation to Covid-19, GROW awards had already been under way for over two years; this fact certainly made a significant difference in their ability to cope. At that point, partnerships had already been established, and data collection was already under way. Many award holders could use the lockdown time to focus on data analysis and publications.

The Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding cuts affected GROW awards to various degrees. In some cases, the negative impact was partially compensated by Covid-related savings, funding from different sources, or contributions from lead UK institutions. However, the cuts were widely seen as causing reputational damage in relations with Southern partners and wider

stakeholders, and the uncertainty that surrounded them led many team members to leave the award to take on jobs elsewhere.

One area in which the potential uniqueness of GROW has remained untapped is the connection between awards. Opportunities for networking and sharing learning between awards have remained very limited. Most Principal Investigators (PIs) reported little or no interaction with other GROW awards; or, in cases where there was collaboration, this was sought out by award holders themselves rather than being centrally organised.

Conclusions, lessons and recommendations

GROW was a large and ambitious GCRF investment, focused on building capacities for interdisciplinary, challenge-led research, through the development and strengthening of research partnerships, as well as through broader stakeholders' engagement. Our analysis shows that GROW has largely delivered on this promise, despite the considerable challenges posed by a global pandemic. Our analysis confirms the insight that the signature investments are closely aligned to the GCRF's underpinning vision and values.

GROW appears to have broken down barriers in different ways – between countries (through international partnerships), between disciplines (through a promotion of interdisciplinary or even transdisciplinary research), between generations of researchers (through the capacity development and empowerment of ECRs) and between academia and the outside world (through stakeholders' engagement and work with local communities).

Lesson 1: Size, scale, length and flexibility of funding matter.

One of the key elements of GROW's success has been its size, scale, and flexibility of

funding. Its size was large enough to allow for flexibility and adaptive management but still small enough for personal connections to be established. GROW has also demonstrated that having funding to match its ambitions was crucial to achieving programme objectives. The length of funding (2017–2022) while sufficient to allow meaningful and sustainable partnerships and networks to emerge (which, it is hoped, will last beyond the length of the award) did not accommodate a sufficiently long enough inception phase to encourage new partnerships to be built. In addition, GROW awards would have benefited from longer no-cost extensions to adequately build on impact activities in the latter stages (particularly given the delays to research activities arising from the impacts of Covid-19).

Recommendations:

- *Future research for development (R4D) investments should build on the strengths of GROW and consider the importance of having substantial funding proportionate to the scope and ambition of the programme. An adequate funding period is important to allow for the development of equitable partnerships, and to engage with stakeholders, and foster research networks.*
- *Consideration should also be given to the two ‘ends’ of the research timeline: the inception period (with adequate time for project set-up and partnership building) and the final stage (with time dedicated to synthesis, dissemination, impact activities and legacy).*

Lesson 2: Fairness in partnerships is not only about ‘who participates’ but also ‘who is left out’.

While the assessment of fairness of partnerships at award level is generally positive, there are potential issues of ‘contextual fairness’, by which GCRF funding may contribute to reinforcing inequality within the Global South research ecosystem. GROW awards were more successful in nurturing well-established relationships than creating new ones. This may potentially lead to disproportionate capacity development and support going to a small

proportion of Southern institutions that are already historically well-connected with institutions in the UK widening the gap between a limited number of well-established, well-connected institutions on the one hand and the majority of Southern research institutions on the other.

Recommendations:

- *In order to encourage new partnerships, more time should be allocated at the application stage to allow new partners as well as established partners in the Global South to co-design the project. Funding for partnership building should be considered. A longer phase of project set-up should also be encouraged in order to establish the foundation for fair process and distribution of benefits, particularly for Southern institutions without previous experience of international collaborations.*

Lesson 3: The experience of GROW award holders has shown the importance of setting clear expectations and providing guidance in a number of key areas.

As GROW was one of the first GCRF calls to be launched, there was a general sense among grantees that requirements were still at some level a ‘work in progress’, expectations were not always clearly communicated, and guidance was not always consistent. While award holders generally appreciated the flexibility of the funders and the role played by project officers (POs), many of them would have welcomed greater support and guidance on a number of areas, including: the administrative requirements; monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL); finance management and financial risk; and VfM.

Recommendation:

- *Funders should provide clear and consistent guidance in the areas outlined above.*

Lesson 4: GROW demonstrated the importance of crossing the divide between natural and social sciences for challenge-led research.

The GROW programme 'pushed' interdisciplinarity more than would have been the case otherwise – particularly with regard to bridging the divide between natural sciences and social sciences. The transformative value of interdisciplinary research was considered by several award holders as lying in its potential to catalyse a change in the culture of UK academia and promote challenge-led research.

Recommendation:

- Future investments for challenge-led research should continue to promote 'wide' interdisciplinarity, breaking silos between natural and social sciences.

Lesson 5: Gender and equity perspectives do not necessarily 'come up' in research processes, unless such a lens is explicitly incorporated.

Many GROW awards have not fully integrated a gender and equity lens in their questions, methods and approaches. With a few notable exceptions, gender is thought about mostly in terms of male/female parity in teams, governance structures and events.

Recommendations:

- *UKRI could facilitate a collective reflection and learning exercise, looking (with hindsight) at how gender dimensions emerged in the tackling of development challenges, which were not necessarily anticipated at the outset.*
- *Funders should provide greater emphasis and guidance on gender and social inclusion during the project design stage.*

Lesson 6: Career progression in research in UK and LMIC contexts takes different routes and the term 'Early career researcher' should be understood against the backdrop of the research capacity needs of LMIC institutions as well as UK institutions.

The emphasis on ECRs appears to be the distinctive feature of GROW and an area of unquestionable success for the programme. One consideration is that the idea of who an 'early career researcher' is was possibly overly influenced by the idea of the 'postdoc', a position which is prominent in UK academia but which does not necessarily

have a correspondence in many other academic environments in the Global South. Many non-UK partners saw the exclusion of direct funding for a PhD as a missed opportunity.

Recommendation:

- *Future R4D investments should consider a broader and context-specific definition of 'early career researcher', to go beyond postdocs and potentially provide funding for PhDs, master's students, or even slightly more senior mid-career researchers.*

Lesson 7: A structured approach at the programme level is needed to share learning and encourage collaboration across the portfolio. The lack of opportunities for networking and sharing learning between awards at the programme level- appears to be a lost opportunity, in particular given the thematic and geographic overlay among many of the GROW awards.

Recommendation:

- *Systematic guidance and convening by the funder are recommended to enable strong cross-award collaboration and knowledge sharing. Opportunities for in-person and virtual gathering, with inclusion and funding for non-UK partners, should be encouraged.*



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