

Global Challenges Research Fund: Global Interdisciplinary Research Hubs Programme Evaluation

Executive Summary

This summary presents findings from the 2021 process evaluation of the Global Challenges Research Fund's Challenge Leaders Initiative.

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 Global Interdisciplinary Research Hubs programme, a GCRF 'signature aimed at challenge-led and impact-focused interdisciplinary research to address intractable development challenges.

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. It seeks to answer the overarching evaluation question: *How are GCRF's signature investments working, and what have they achieved?*

Overview of the Hubs programme: The Interdisciplinary Research Hubs programme

Key points

- The interdisciplinary research Hubs embody the spirit of GCRF through their focus on achieving the "gold standard" in international development research: excellent research that has real-world impact.
- To fulfil that ambition, the Hubs have needed to innovate and to disrupt existing delivery systems and processes.
- It has taken time to develop new systems underpinned by the principle of truly equitable partnerships with the Global South.
- Investing time has created networks that have demonstrated resilience in the face of Covid-19 and the Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget reductions – networks that have the capacity to outlast funding cycles and that are showing potential to push boundaries and go beyond the norm in research for development.

is a large-scale GCRF investment which aims to deliver innovative solutions to complex development issues through challenge-led interdisciplinary research. It is

based on the fundamental principle of equity between Global South and Global North partners. Managed by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), with an overall investment of £200 million, distributed between twelve interdisciplinary Hubs, the programme represented an ambitious investment in research for development, calling for radical new ways of working to meet GCRF's strategic goals.

Each Hub was awarded from £13 million to £15 million over five years. The awards are administered by UKRI and co-funded through the Research Councils. Thematically the Hubs span a number of different sustainable development goals and challenge areas. All the Hubs have formed extensive networks across the UK, the Global South and beyond. This includes 657 research partnerships across 55 countries, with 21% based in least developed countries, 47% in lower-middle-income countries and 32% in upper middle-income countries.

The Hubs have operated in the challenging context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, with the reduction in BEIS ODA allocation to UKRI in the financial year (FY) 2021/22, the Hubs' funding was cut by up to 70%, and a formal stage gate review was initiated to inform ministers' decisions on the continued funding for the programme for FYs 2022/23 and 2023-24. After the 2021 Spending Review, full funding was reinstated for the remaining term of the Hubs.

Evaluation findings

The Hubs' structures and processes have been critical to establishing the programme in a way that embodies GCRF principles, with equitable partnership a particular strength. The Hubs' readiness to develop new structures and processes over time has driven innovation and learning at the programme and award level. Lessons are emerging for future complex research for development programmes. (EQ 1)

The Hubs are well managed by UKRI and have effective structures and processes in place. More in-depth UKRI guidance was needed at the inception of the programme, due to its complexity and scale.

The Hubs have invested time to develop innovative structures and processes to respond to the requirements of the complex and ambitious call. There are excellent structures in place to support equitable partnerships, with fairness considerations well integrated throughout, including a strong focus on co-design and co-delivery. These elements form a critical pathway to development impact.

There is no clear framework in place for gender equity and social inclusion at the programme level. The Hubs have developed structures and processes to support gender responsive research, but consideration of social inclusion is less systematic in research design and implementation.

While significant learning is emerging at the award level, it is not being well captured at the programme level in order to build synergies effectively and contribute to legacy. The Hubs will provide foundations for future programmes and it is critical for learning to be effectively captured.

Capacity strengthening is central to the Hubs programme as a key pathway to addressing development challenges. The Hubs are going beyond structured approaches to support the capacity of researchers, and are enhancing and strengthening interactions in their networks. This is building capacity across the UK and Global South research and innovation (R&I) ecosystem. (EQ 2)

The Hubs programme has developed complex, non-linear processes to support capacity strengthening for development outcomes. Structured approaches largely focus on the development of early career researchers. The programme also provides valuable informal opportunities for knowledge exchange, collaboration and skills transfer across the Hubs network.

Developing and widening the network of stakeholders beyond the research community has been an important aspect of capacity building. Including communities, local organisations, national and

international policymakers helps to ensure the strength and sustainability of the connections beyond the lifetime of the fund.

At the organisational level, co-created policies and frameworks have been established in an iterative and adaptive way, which will enhance institutional capacity to conduct research for development in both the Global North and the Global South.

Cuts to the Hubs' budgets as a result of reductions in the BEIS ODA allocation to UKRI represent an obstacle to fairness in capacity building. Newer partnerships have suffered direct cuts, while more established partnerships have been preserved. This has the potential to exacerbate existing inequalities in the Global South.

The Hubs have taken time to develop innovative structures and processes to deliver interdisciplinary research with development impact while trying to overcome operational challenges and systemic barriers to working effectively in low-to-middle-income country (LMIC) contexts. Despite inefficiencies during set-up that had implications for effectiveness and equity, the Hubs are a rich source of learning for other complex development programmes focused on impact and equity. (EQ 3)

A longer set-up period was needed for the Hubs programme to establish complex networks and partnerships with Southern institutions in an equitable way, particularly as there were few precedents within the UK R&I community and limited guidance from UKRI.

UKRI and research organisation requirements for financial management and due diligence were challenged by the needs of LMIC partners. Payments in arrears had negative implications for efficiency and equity when applied to Global South institutions with few financial reserves. Some research organisations, supported by UKRI, created bespoke financial and assurance processes in response, but these have not been applied strategically and consistently across the Hubs programme, raising a question over transparency and fairness.

The risk management approach at the programme level placed the burden of managing risk on lead research

organisations. This was not sufficient to respond to the varied risks of operating in fragile and conflict affected states, and in LMICs. A more balanced and holistic approach is needed to avoid delays and risks and to ensure uniformity across the portfolio.

The ODA budget reductions, and responses to them, have raised fairness concerns. While the Hubs made significant efforts to protect Southern partners from funding cuts, some partnerships in low-income countries were terminated. Some Hub researchers took pay cuts or worked pro bono.

The Hubs have made good progress towards their desired outcomes, successfully responding to the challenges of Covid-19 and the reductions in ODA funding. Working with broad, inclusive networks has allowed the programme to develop shared understanding of development challenges and to influence change at a local, national and international level. (EQ 4)

The Hubs have produced a significant number of outputs, which are starting to be taken up by national policymakers and local communities. Budget cuts as a result of BEIS ODA funding reductions have constrained progress in translating these results into longer-term outcomes, despite the programme demonstrating resilience in maintaining its networks and refocusing its activities.

The programme led a strong, adaptive and agile response to Covid-19. The Hubs developed innovative ways of working; leveraged partnerships to maintain research progress; supported the digital inclusion of Southern research partners and communities; and demonstrated relevance through Covid-19 policy and research.

Stakeholder engagement has been a strength. The Hubs are amplifying the voices of communities, leveraging partnerships with change champions, influencing change at a local, national and international level, and working with policymakers. Strategic engagement with non-academic local partners has been limited by UKRI restrictions on their funding eligibility.

As the Hubs enter the final stage of delivery, finding synergies and leveraging these networks will be crucial to scaling up

innovations and achieving transformative change.

The Hubs have successfully overcome significant barriers, largely due to their networks, which have afforded them flexibility and adaptability, linking them to the right people to take timely advantage of opportunities. (EQ 5)

Key barriers faced by the programme included the Covid-19 pandemic and operational challenges to working in lower and middle income countries. Financial and due diligence requirements were a particular challenge.

The size, scale and scope of the awards, UKRI's support for adaptations, equitable in-country and international partnerships, and the Hubs networks are key factors enabling the Hubs to continue making progress towards outcomes. Additionally, UKRI's flexibility at the operational level has been important in supporting Hubs to respond and adapt to challenges of working in LMICs, of Covid-19 and the ODA cuts.

GCRF is an innovative, research for development (R4D) funding mechanism in its holistic approach, its focus on interdisciplinarity and its emphasis on equitable partnerships and impact. While challenging for the Hubs, their response to Covid-19 and the ODA funding reductions have shown the value of the research, and the resilience and equity of the networks created. (EQ 6)

There is broad consensus among Global South and Global North partners that GCRF is an innovative R4D funding mechanism. Within this, the size, scale and scope of the Hubs was cited as a key differentiator of the programme and fundamental for enabling research with development impact.

There is clear added value in the Hubs' networks, which amplify research results, creating greater potential for impact, and directly benefit research and project partners. Resilient networks have allowed the Hubs to adapt and respond to Covid-19. The survival of many partnerships despite the ODA reductions confirms the value of the network and of its principles of fairness and mutual respect.

Conclusions, lessons and recommendations

The Hubs programme is an innovative R4D programme which embodies the spirit of GCRF in seeking innovative solutions to complex development problems through challenge-led interdisciplinary research and equitable partnerships.

The Hubs are producing relevant, challenge-led and impact-focused research, and are making good progress along their ToCs towards outcomes and impact, despite the challenges presented by institutional set-up delays, Covid-19, and ODA funding reductions. The Hubs' networks have been key enablers in overcoming barriers and achieving progress towards desired outcomes and impacts.

To fulfil the ambition for equitable partnerships and the delivery of excellent research with impact, the Hubs have set up novel structures and processes. This has taken time and has led to set-up delays but has significant value.

There has been tension in the attempt to develop novel, transformative structures and processes within the old operating system. The dual challenge of creating new ways of working, and disrupting and changing old ways of doing things, has challenged the Hubs and has taken time. While UKRI has demonstrated flexibility and adaptability in supporting the Hubs to devise their own solutions, the lack of a strategic and consistent approach has contributed to slowness and irregularities.

The Hubs programme is a rich repository of learning for the design and set-up of other complex development programmes. There is a need for this learning to be more effectively captured at the programme level.

Lesson 1: Impact depends on relationships with partners and stakeholders.

Recommendations

1.1: Hubs need to develop an impact strategy guiding the final two years of delivery, clearly identifying key stakeholders and outlining roles, responsibilities and resources for partners in influencing change.

1.2: Hubs need to reassess their use of the 'Flexible Fund', ring-fencing it to support impact activities at a local, national or regional level.

1.3: The Hubs could empower local partners to proactively identify leverage points for impact, including providing resources to pursue locally led initiatives.

Lesson 2: Networks have the potential to deliver significant value beyond the sum of their parts.

Recommendations

2.1: UKRI needs to provide clear and consistent guidance on impact activities for the final phase.

2.2: UKRI should consider using its convening power to bring researchers, in-country decision makers and global players together in forums to discuss key strategic challenges and findings from the Hubs programme.

2.3: UKRI could consider creating an 'impact fund' or 'regional opportunities fund' (or redesign the 'flexible fund' for impact), with clearly defined guidance for its usage.

2.4: UKRI should consider enhanced eligibility criteria for third sector organisations in a new impact-focused fund.

Lesson 3: Learning needs to be systematically integrated at all levels. The failure to capture programmatic learning is a significant risk and would represent a considerable loss for the legacy of the programme.

Recommendations

3.1: UKRI needs to create opportunities to convene awards to enable strong cross-award collaboration and knowledge sharing (inclusion and funding for non-UK partners should be encouraged).

3.2: UKRI could consider commissioning a learning review of the Hubs, including

management processes, design and delivery mechanisms, and approaches to impact.

3.3: UKRI needs to develop a legacy framework for the Hubs programme, including approaches to synthesise findings across the awards.

For the design of GCRF's successor fund:

Lesson 4: Size, scale and scope of funding matters for delivering excellent research with development impact, supported by the kinds of systems that the evaluation has found to be effective.

Recommendations

4.1: BEIS should consider including a fund for large awards of the size, scale and scope of the Hubs in future research for development investments, with investment in effective systems to match the scale of ambition.

4.2: Delivery partners (DPs) should develop proposals for programmes which clearly place emphasis on challenge-led and impact-focused research and on equitable partnerships.

Lesson 5: Delivering transformative change requires not only the right policies and processes but also an enabling environment at the funder level to establish bespoke and flexible approaches for working in LMIC settings.

Recommendations

5.1: DPs need to establish clear policies and guidance for research organisations at the outset of the programme for advance payments and assurance processes and the associated risk management approaches.

5.2: DPs need to take proactive steps to capture lessons from the Hubs programme.

Lesson 6: Fair and equitable partnerships are key routes to delivering development impact, but require specific structures and processes to embed equity in operations and implementation.

Recommendations

6.1: Drawing on the success of the Hubs programme, DPs need to emphasise impact-focused research and equitable partnerships in the funding call.

6.2: DPs need to ensure sufficient timescales and provide travel grants to allow for genuine co-design with partners during the proposal phase as in the Hubs programme.

6.3: DPs need to provide clear guidance for implementing partners on structures and processes for equitable partnerships (e.g. governance structures, codes of conduct, gender strategies, etc.).

Lesson 7: A hands-on approach to management, particularly in the inception phase, is needed by the delivery partner. This is to ensure that core processes and structures, such as a gender and inclusion strategy, are prioritised and implemented within awards and supported by ongoing review.

Recommendations

7.1: DPs need to provide clear and detailed guidance at the inception phase on policies, frameworks and structures required.

7.2: DPs need to mandate the requirement for a code of conduct and a safeguarding and gender and social inclusion strategy during the inception phase.

Lesson 8: The time frame for the set-up of a programme of such complexity and scale needs to be extended, with an explicit recognition of the trade-offs. A flat spend profile should be avoided.

Recommendations

8.1: DPs should consider agreeing longer inception periods to reflect the complexity of the programme, range of stakeholders and level of ambition.

8.2: DPs should consider establishing a longer funding cycle to accommodate partnership development in the early stage and dissemination, impact activities and synthesis in latter stages.

8.3: DPs should consider adopting a curved spend profile to recognise the time needed in the first year for institutional set-up and to avoid large underspends.

8.4: DPs should consider allowing flexibility in virement procedures to accommodate the challenges among some LMIC partners in disbursing funds.

8.5: DPs need to provide flexibility in the programme for iterative planning and staggered collaboration agreements to increase agility and avoid set-up delays.

Lesson 9: Implementing programmes of such scale and ambition in LMIC settings means there is greater exposure to risk. This requires a strategy to risk that is grounded in a better understanding of risks in LMIC and FCAS and of engaging in these settings.

Recommendations

9.1: DPs should consider following good practice in developing flexible and shared risk frameworks with partners to ensure the onus of managing risk is not placed on implementing partners alone.



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