



Wilton Park



Image: Chris Waits

Report

**Knowledge for development: optimising
development impact through investments in
research**

Monday 10 – Wednesday 12 October 2016 | WP1514

In association with:



Department
for International
Development



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Executive summary

Building on the UK Government's 2015 spending review, the role that science has to play in addressing challenges faced by developing countries has been brought to the fore. The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) is a £1.5 billion fund aimed at catalysing high-impact, quality-driven, multi-disciplinary research to provide major breakthroughs in improving the lives of individuals in the Global South. It will fund cutting-edge research which addresses some of the universal challenges faced by developing countries.

The fund, which is operational until 2020 and dispersed through the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS), is to work alongside an expanded Newton Fund and Official Development Assistance (ODA) funded research from the Department for International Development (DFID). GCRF is administered through delivery partners including the UK Research Councils (RCUK) and national academies.

This Wilton Park meeting brought together representatives of UK and developing country policymakers, academic management, researchers and development practitioners to identify opportunities for effective implementation of the fund. It aimed to inform how the UK can optimise the impact and sustainability of development outcomes through the GCRF.

Questions addressed in the course of the forum included:

- How do we ensure that the GCRF is focused on the right development challenges?
- What approaches to research procurement, partnerships and management will drive impact?
- How can the GCRF make a sustained contribution to building capacity and capability for research in developing countries?

Clarity of purpose

There was an overwhelming consensus that the design and intent of the GCRF should be clearly and simply presented, so that all relevant stakeholders can see the impetus of the calls and can have the right reference material to produce high quality submissions. Discussion ranged from the multi-disciplinary nature of the GCRF to appeals for research to ensure alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (COP21). There was discussion on how the fund's scope and size could enable inter-disciplinary solutions to development challenges by working across SDGs. In particular, the GCRF could address the interplay between various goals, to produce greater multipliers. Recommendations:

- Set out a clear statement of the intent of the GCRF and build enthusiasm around the opportunity to use the GCRF to deliver development impacts
- Frame the interdisciplinary nature of the calls pragmatically and cohesively
- Develop a theory of change, at the highest level, describing how the GCRF will maximise impact (including through better development decisions, new technologies, stronger partnerships with the Global South and strengthening knowledge systems) so that research councils and institutions can appropriately

design interventions to improve the quality and relevance of research

Build strong and equal partnerships

A strong and equitable relationship between UK research institutions and developing country partners is fundamental to ensuring the success and sustainability of the GCRF. Strong and equal Southern partners will help drive relevance and realistic pathways to impact. It will require a conscious effort to bring in developing country partners throughout the GCRF design and call process. Partnerships based on trust, engagement, fairness, sharing and equitable behaviour need to be developed. Recommendations:

- Ensure that Southern partners are represented in the governance arrangements (including using the Wilton Park participants as a sounding board to the Strategic Advisory Group), in call definition and proposal selection
- Establish core principles for strong and equal partnerships; ask researchers to describe how they will deliver the principles as part of the bid process and monitor this
- Make it possible to separate the administrative/financial component from the academic element of bids to allow Southern academic leadership to flourish

Think beyond capacity building to strategic investments in knowledge systems

If GCRF is to foster any form of sustainability beyond 2020 it needs to ensure that it invests in strengthening the capacities of both UK institutions and institutions from the Global South. It is also an opportunity to develop a cadre of future leaders and invest in leadership development in countries where GCRF operates. The fund presents a unique opportunity for UK academics to work with partners around the world and at the same time to address significant global challenges in equitable Southern participation in global research systems. Recommendations:

- Map-out capacity strengths and gaps across various institutions, countries and investment themes
- Actively develop connections between academics and civil servants to create policy and research champions in all focus countries
- Explore opportunities for innovative GCRF investments in systems as well as organisations (eg building on partnerships between UK and Southern research councils piloted under Newton)
- Pilot a whole of UK government approach to building knowledge systems in a small group of countries, thinking strategically about the sum of GCRF, Newton and DFID investments
- UK Universities should leverage existing expertise on strengthening research and knowledge systems, to ensure that when they design such interventions they build on years of UK knowledge and experience in this area including from the development sector

Build a balanced portfolio

The GCRF needs to take a portfolio approach to deliver an over-arching impact larger than the sum of its parts. Taking a portfolio approach to the fund in terms of risk vs impact will allow the fund to gain from a multiplier effect. This multiplier could be achieved through the thematic focus of investments, through strengthened networks, knowledge systems and leadership of GCRF investments. The portfolio needs to also be balanced in terms of timescale and risk, allowing for high-risk, high-impact, as well as more flexible projects with longer lead times to impact that could ensure a mix of early wins and transformative change. In this way the GCRF can respond to today's challenges, but also challenges of the future. Recommendations:

- Identify shorter term outputs which would allow the fund to demonstrate early impact as well as clarity on longer term investments and their direction of travel
- Support a GCRF-wide culture of evaluation and learning in order to articulate an impact pathway for the fund that builds on previous investments

Drive coherence within GCRF and across funding mechanisms

The design of the GCRF is an opportunity to optimise the long term gains from investments in research and knowledge systems. Coordination with the Newton Fund, current DFID

ODA research and other programmes acting complementarily will be critical. Demand-led rather than supply-led calls will help to drive coherence and sustainability. Additionally, there were calls for flexibility within projects, with participants noting the process of research inevitably features venturing into the unknown, which may produce significantly different outcomes than the initial research intention. Recommendations:

- To ensure networks and knowledge systems are built, invest in portfolio synthesis across themes or geographical areas. This could be through Senior Fellows or “Centres of Excellence” that cross-cut regions and themes to help the impact of the GCRF extend beyond the individual research projects and support a more coherent and sustainable research system
- Consider the strategic balance of geographical focus across funding mechanism to ensure that resources are not disproportionately focused on Middle Income Countries (MICs) or on a small number of institutions

Method of engagement

In order to incentivise research proposals that foster quality-driven multi-disciplinary research, the GCRF needs to prioritise and communicate a clear principle of engagement. Communicating the purpose and ambition of the Fund, through engaging stories about the impact of research on development, is part of a process that could bring the Fund to life. Practically, it is important to ensure that there is an emphasis on fairness and equity in partnerships with GCRF able to act as a sourcing/facilitating agent to share challenges and unblock barriers. Recommendations:

- Ensure calls provide sufficient time within the proposal window to allow genuinely transformative multi-disciplinary partnerships to form

Innovation and wider stakeholders

There were appeals for partnerships that produce innovation and move development challenges forward, for instance by placing more focus on the role of external actors, in particular the private sector, but also civil society, philanthropy and NGOs. Through bringing in further partnerships with wider stakeholders, the intention is that the GCRF can leverage these larger networks to deliver more impact. Many participants called for demand-driven research, relevant to current or future challenges. Innovations in research have to work with this wider range of partners who have the ability to take ideas to action, influence changes in policy and provide jobs.

Peter O’Flynn and Kathryn Hingston

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