



Department for
Business, Energy
& Industrial Strategy

Research and Innovation for Development

Evaluation Summary

The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF)
Evaluation: Stage 1A Synthesis report

The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) provides dedicated funding to research focused on addressing global challenges which most significantly impact upon developing countries. It achieves this by supporting challenge led disciplinary and interdisciplinary research, strengthening capability for research and innovation within low and middle income countries, and providing an agile response to emergencies, where there is an urgent research and on-the-ground need. From 2016–2021 the UK government committed up to £1.5 billion in Official Development Assistance (ODA). ODA is aid that specifically targets the development and welfare of developing countries.

This is a summary of the 'GCRF Stage 1A synthesis'¹ evaluation report that was produced by independent external evaluators (ITAD). This synthesis draws together three technical assessments of findings from the first five years of the GCRF. The assessments found that GCRF is making clear progress in terms of establishing the foundations for development impact - becoming relevant, coherent, well-targeted, fair, gender-sensitive and socially inclusive, especially in the 'signature investments' (large-scale programmes). However, inherent challenges in the Fund's size, and its complicated delivery architecture mean that progress is varied across the portfolio. Gaps were identified, especially around processes for managing for development impact and how poverty impacts are considered.

Key terms used in this report

Equitable partnerships

Relationships which demonstrate fair opportunity, process, and sharing of benefits, and outcomes.

Relevance

The extent to which the interventions respond to beneficiaries, global, country, and partner/institution needs, policies, and priorities.

Coherence

The compatibility of the intervention with other interventions in a country, sector or institution.

Research fairness

A method of designing, conducting and evaluating research that takes into consideration the potential effects of the research on all those involved, as well as the impact on the context where the research takes place.

Gender

A social scientific term used to describe shared social ideals of femininity and masculinity.

Social inclusion

The process of improving the terms of participation in society, particularly for people who are disadvantaged, through enhancing opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights.

Poverty

Entails more than the lack of income and productive resources. Its manifestations include hunger and malnutrition, limited access to education and other basic services, social discrimination, and exclusion, as well as the lack of participation in decision making.

[1] <https://www.newton-gcrf.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/gcrf-evaluation-1a-synthesis-report.pdf>

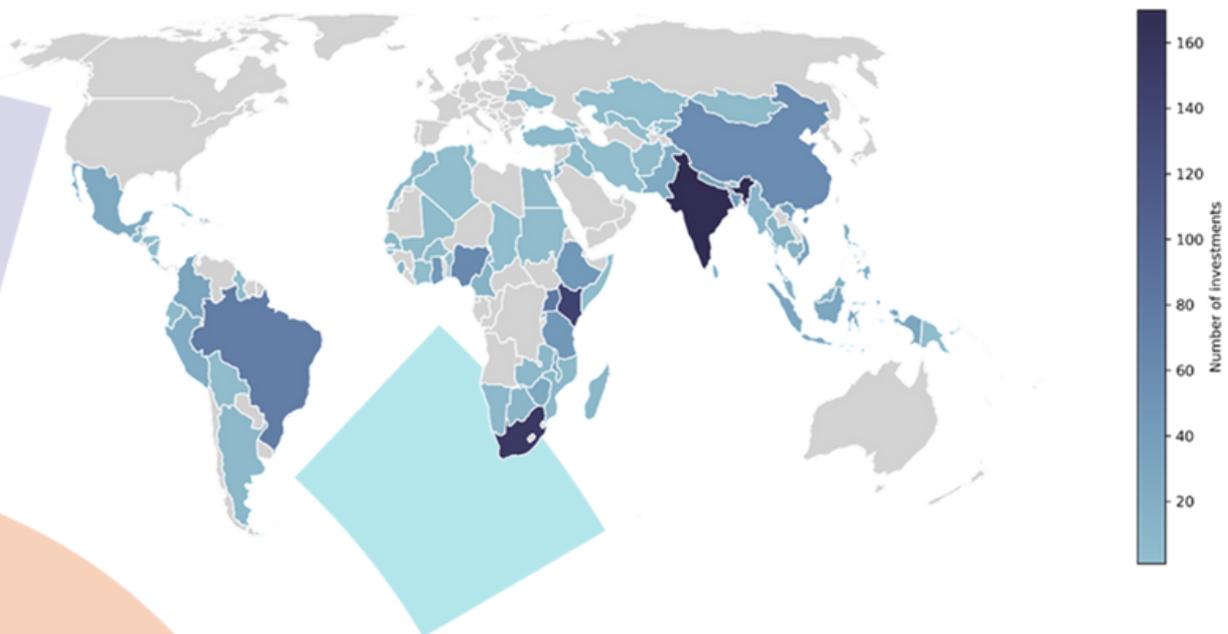
Achievements

Stage 1A of the GCRF evaluation aims to understand the extent to which the fund is focused on creating the foundations for outcomes and impact, as described in the Theory of Change,² and how these foundations position the fund to deliver on its intended impact and objectives. Stage 1A is centred on answering the evaluation question: Is GCRF relevant, well-targeted, fair, gender-sensitive, socially inclusive and well-managed?

GCRF has produced a high volume of diverse outputs and interdisciplinary collaborations. These go beyond academic publications, and include 20,373 creative, policy and technology outputs.

The evaluation found that GCRF is performing well in its signature investments. Signature investments are the strategic initiatives that represent the ‘essence’ of what GCRF was set up to achieve. These include Growing Research Capacity (GROW),³ Interdisciplinary Hubs,⁴ the UK Space Agency’s International Partnerships Programme (IPP),⁵ the Future Leaders – African Independent Research (FLAIR) programme⁶ and the Collective Fund.⁷ The greatest progress was found in the ‘relevance’ and ‘equitable partnerships’ measures in the signature investments and wider portfolio.

Associated GCRF number of investments by country (2019-20)⁸



[2] <https://www.newton-gcrf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Theory-of-change.pdf>

[3] <https://www.newton-gcrf.org/gcrf/delivery-partners/uk-research-and-innovation/>

[4] <https://www.ukri.org/our-work/collaborating-internationally/global-challenges-research-fund/>

[5] <https://www.newton-gcrf.org/gcrf/delivery-partners/uk-space-agency/>

[6] <https://arua.org.za/>

[7] <https://esrc.ukri.org/research/international-research/global-challenges-research-fund-gcrf/ukri-gcrf-collective-programme/>

[8] Itad–BEIS, 2020. GCRF Annual Review: Pilot for Year 3 2019–2020.

Improvements

The evaluation found that there were tensions between research excellence and managing for development impact. While prioritising research excellence often results in a focus on partners with more established institutions in higher-income countries, prioritising development objectives tends to mean concentrating on capacity building in less established institutions in low income countries (LICs). The evaluation found some strong examples of programmes which were effective at combining research excellence and development impact (the Hubs, GROW, FLAIR and IPP programmes).

However, in other programmes and awards it was less consistent. The evaluation findings suggest that more is needed alongside partnerships to ensure that the foundations for development impact are in place. Coordinated strategic initiatives are needed from partner organisations and fund management to help navigate the tensions between research excellence and development impact, finding ways to engage less-resourced institutions in LICs, and ensuring consistency in how gender, inclusion and poverty are addressed in awards.

The evaluation suggests that the fund's strategic overview of its research could have been strengthened. Without systems and processes to support a portfolio-wide view, GCRF risks being a portfolio of research that does not become greater than the sum of its parts. Isolated research projects and discrete networks remain, with innovation occurring without transmitting the benefits of learning around how to address development challenges or building capacity across the whole research ecosystem.

In its strategy and theory of change, GCRF was positioned to be a challenge-led fund but has not been directly implemented in this way. Challenges were not specifically framed, and aims were not always well defined. This has caused a lack of fund identity and ownership.

887

artistic and
creative
outputs5,850+
research
publications1,076
policy
influences174
policy citations46
innovation
outputs
701
technology
outputs6,114
grant-assisted
projects

Recommendations

The evaluators made the following recommendations:

Establish a consistent Challenge Fund identity, with the cultures, shared ownership and structures that support this.

Key structures and systems are needed to deliver a fund that has a sense of identity and ownership, which is structurally aligned around clear development-led missions. The signature investments offer useful models for cascading management structures and approaches that could be applied across the whole GCRF.

Establish quality standards for ODA research excellence to optimise the combination of research excellence and development impact.

GCRF needs to balance the key priorities for research excellence and development impact, and quality standards for ODA excellence should be agreed.

Establish a collective monitoring and learning process, with appropriate structures and accountabilities, that promotes a fund-wide portfolio overview to support adaptive management.

This should go beyond data management to encompass a learning strategy that is resourced for knowledge management, capturing, and sharing learning across BEIS and delivery partners.

