

# How to write a fundable proposal for the Global Challenges Research Fund

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A revolution is happening in the way we do international development in this country. It is not the end to foreign aid spending that the *Daily Mail* wants to see. It is a new and very different way of spending our aid budget, which I believe will transform the impact of international development.

## Gold standard research informing sustainable, scalable impact



This year, a raft of new development projects will start, led by UK Universities and Research Institutes rather than development agencies. The projects are part of the Government's £1.5 billion Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). Each project still aims to deliver important benefits for people in lower and middle income countries. However, led by researchers, these projects focus on discovering new ways of tackling development challenges.

They seek to understand the underlying processes and develop theories that can explain what's going on and why, and develop solutions. The focus on research and innovation means that GCRF doesn't just deliver benefits for the local populations the researchers are working with. New insights emerging from the research will provide a deeper understanding of the issues those populations face, and empower countries with similar problems around the world to learn lessons that can help them lift

themselves out of poverty.

I have to confess that I was deeply skeptical when GCRF was first announced. I still think that this was dreamt up by George Osborne as a clever way of meeting a manifesto pledge to maintain funding for research by siphoning money from the aid budget. As a result, I was full of doubts:

- Does the UK research community have the tools and experience to rise to the challenges that the development community has been tackling for decades?
- Will researchers be expected to focus on impact to the detriment of high quality research?
- Will funding for research that cannot deliver ODA priorities (like polar and deep sea research) get increasingly squeezed?

However, after sitting through a two-day panel meeting for the latest GCRF call this week, I have to say that I am inspired. The first thing that inspires me about the proposals we evaluated is their focus on understanding the causes and processes that underpin development challenges. As a result, these projects add to the global store of knowledge about these important issues, and provide ways of upscaling benefits from local populations to national and international scales. The second thing is the depth, breadth and complexity of interdisciplinary endeavor in many of these projects, which goes beyond what I typically see in development projects. This is important because so many of the challenges we are trying to tackle in the developing world do not respect disciplinary boundaries or aid silos, such as water or women's empowerment. We are increasingly recognizing the inter-connected and complex nature of development challenges, and the need for interdisciplinary approaches that cut across silos.

## How to write a fundable GCRF proposal

GCRF is a new and very different way of funding research, which puts impact centre-stage. The need to clearly demonstrate relevance to Overseas Development Assistance priorities is new. Unlike other funding calls from the Research Councils, where you just have to have an "acceptable" pathway to impact, projects that do not convincingly deliver benefits for target countries will not be funded by GCRF. However, if you

think you're going to get funding for work that generates impact without advancing knowledge, then you are misguided. Unlike previous funding schemes in this space, where DfID had panel members, GCRF funding has been devolved largely to the Research Councils, who are committed to "supporting cutting-edge research that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries". This means that research excellence remains paramount.

Different calls will develop their own scoring systems. The team who designed the scoring system for the panel meeting I attended weighted research excellence slightly higher than impact, but ensured it would be impossible for a project to get funded that did not score highly in terms of its ODA relevance. Research excellence was graded on a 1.0-6.9 scale and strategic relevance on a 2.0-5.9 scale. That meant that even the proposals that scored highest for research (and in reality it tends to be very hard to get a score in the "exceptional" category) had to at least be "good" or "very good" in the strategic relevance category.

## Excellent research in GCRF

It is important to realise that reviewers and panel members do not score the research excellence any differently in a GCRF call than they would in any other Research Council research funding call. The ODA focus of GCRF does not mean researchers can get away with doing routine, incremental, over-ambitious or flawed research. Whatever your discipline, and whatever Research Council is leading the call, make sure you are proposing exciting, cutting-edge, novel and significant research.

You should not necessarily assume that you need to have a balance of disciplines and research that matches the balance of Research Councils behind the call. Some GCRF calls clearly stipulate that you have to address the remits of all funders in your proposal, but where this is not stated, as long as your research is clearly within the scope of the call, you can submit a proposal that is targeted towards one of the Research Councils not leading the call.

## ODA relevance and impact in GCRF

The big challenge for the research community is to get our heads around the sorts of impacts that GCRF panels are looking for. Of course, the first step is to look at the call specification and ODA guidance. Beyond this however, there is a lot of uncertainty across the research community.

In an attempt to make things clearer, I have discussed what I learned from being a GCRF panel member with fellow panel members and staff from BBSRC, NERC, MRC and ESRC to come up with a list of suggestions that should help you write a fundable GCRF proposal:

- **Choose an eligible country** from the OECD Development Assistance Committee's (DAC) list of Low and/or Middle Income Countries (LMICs). This list changes every three years, so it is worth knowing if you are targeting an Upper Middle Income Country that might be reclassified and drop off this list. If they remain higher income countries, then the Committee is likely to reclassify Antigua & Barbuda, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina and Venezuela in early 2017.
- **Benefit disadvantaged, impoverished populations and major development issues** that will impact on the economic development and welfare of the target countr(ies). Don't assume that delivering benefits for an elite group, business or sector will necessarily "trickle down" to surrounding populations. If that is your strategy, then make sure there is a robust pathway to impacts for these groups that can be pursued as part of the project. This is particularly important if you decide to target an upper-middle income country from the DAC list.
- **Explain how many people are affected by the issues the project will address**, identify and characterise the groups who will benefit, explain exactly how they will benefit and why this is important. If only a small number of people will directly benefit from the project, explain how those benefits may be scaled up or transferred to other populations as part of your pathway to impact. If your impacts are primarily economic or environmental, explain how people will benefit from this in terms of welfare and livelihoods.
- **Don't overplay your hand** though. Making wild claims about the economic or health benefits of your project based on shaky assumptions is likely to earn you ire from reviewers and panel members alike.
- **Build capacity for research and/or development with in-country partners**, for example including collaborative working (in some calls this may be as Co-Is and in some this may need to be via sub-contracts), training and skills development

- **Build on existing work in the country/region and add value to global research efforts** by international agencies and consortia. Reviewers and panel members will know about previous work and key partners in the country or region working on the issues, and will question proposals that appear to be unaware of this. At minimum, you need to build on this existing work and be committed to communicating your findings to these partners. Far better however...
- **If you have them, demonstrate that you have strong existing in-country partnerships** with named teams/individuals in organisations that have a track record of working on the issues with the stakeholders you will need to work with
- **Do preparatory work** that shows you have been working in the country already, understand the issues and potential constraints and can demonstrate that the proposed work is practical and feasible
- **Support the country you are working with to co-create solution rather than imposing what you think is a solution.** Don't be patronising. They may not have access to certain expertise, technology or resources, which the UK can provide. However, people living and working in these countries will know what will and will not work.