

IDC Effectiveness of UK Aid inquiry – UKCDR written evidence

Overview of key messages

This written evidence is from the UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR), to support the International Development Committee's inquiry on the effectiveness of UK Aid. This evidence will focus on the following questions which have the greatest overlap with UKCDR's expertise:

- How effective and transparent is the UK aid spent by the Department for International Development (DFID) compared to aid allocated to other Government departments and to the cross-Government funds? (Addressed in two sections, one on effectiveness and one on transparency)
- How should the national interest be defined, and what weight should it be given, in relation to targeting UK aid?

The key messages of this written evidence can be summarised as follows:

- Research and innovation have a crucial role to play in improving the effectiveness of UK Aid. UK is a global leader in research for innovation.
- DFID, and other UK government departments, perform well in international comparisons of the transparency of aid for international development. UKCDR facilitates and supports several initiatives to further develop that transparency in UK Aid spend on research.
- In a world that is more interdependent than ever, it is important when defining the national interest to consider the importance of tackling global development issues.
- Research for international development has a crucial role to play in supporting greater security both for the UK and overseas.

About UKCDR

The UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR) is a group of government departments and research funders working in international development. For over a decade, we have brought UK research funders together to discuss priorities and coordinate efforts to garner maximum impact. Our mission is to amplify the value and impact of research for global development by promoting coherence, collaboration and joint action among UK research funders.

We are a neutral and impartial entity governed by the Strategic Coherence of ODA-funded Research (SCOR) Board. The SCOR Board is chaired by an independent member, Professor Peter Piot, and brings together the Chief Scientific Advisers and Directors of our core members to provide oversight of UKCDR's work and to discuss international development research priorities across their own organisations and coordinate efforts to garner maximum impact. The funding bodies that make up UKCDR's core membership are:

- Department for International Development (DFID); on behalf of all devolved administrations (Scottish Government, Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies)
- Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS)
- Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC)
- UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) (incorporating the seven UK Research Councils, Innovate UK and Research England)
- Wellcome Trust
- Independent non-affiliated experts

UKCDR also convenes a wider stakeholder group and impartial fora for discussion on key themes, identified through our mapping and analysis work, where joint or complimentary research investment has the potential to increase impact for developing countries. We convene the following funder fora:

- Research Capacity Strengthening Group (RCSG)
- Health Funders Forum
- Disasters Research Group (DRG)
- Communications Forum
- Epidemics Preparedness and Response Group

We draw on the complimentary skills of our UK members and wider international stakeholders across civil society, business, philanthropy and academia by supporting them to work collaboratively and in partnership. We encourage our members and stakeholders to work collaboratively to make a difference in gap or opportunity areas, to reduce the risk of duplication and share accountability.

We undertake projects in partnership with our members, to enhance the collective policy for UK funded development research. For example, UKCDR took the lead coordinating role in the development of an evidence based “safeguarding” policy for UK development research, working with DFID, DHSC, BEIS, UKRI, Wellcome Trust and other stakeholders.

Background on UK ODA-funded research for development

In recent decades, there has been unprecedented global development progress. Since the 1990s, the world has managed to more than halve the numbers of child deaths and of people living in extreme poverty. But there is still much progress to be made, in a world that is rapidly changing and where major development, demographic and environmental transitions are bringing new challenges that require different transdisciplinary and innovative approaches. In 2015, recognising the complexity of the world in which we live, the UK along with 192 other countries adopted the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including a set of 17 Global Goals to make the world a better place by 2030, by reducing poverty, ending hunger, tackling climate change, strengthening global peace, and promoting prosperity.

UK Universities and research institutes have a long tradition of outstanding work in, for and with developing countries. Recognising the value of research, in 2015 the UK government made a dramatic shift within its international development efforts – a yearly incremental rise in aid spend specifically for research from under £400 million in 2015 to over £1.2 billion in 2021.

At UKCDR, we firmly believe that research across disciplines and in partnership with low- and middle-income countries is essential to drive global development progress. The UK ODA funding landscape provides the opportunity to address the global goals through the generation of knowledge.

How effective is the UK aid spent by the Department for International Development (DFID) compared to aid allocated to other Government departments and to the cross-Government funds?

As the International Development Committee concluded in its 2018 report on the definition and administration of ODA, “the UK is respected worldwide for the quality of its ODA research base and

the consequent benefits it affords in enabling context-sensitive and targeted aid interventions.”¹ Taken together, UK aid spent by the Department for International Development, other Government departments and the cross-Government funds on research for and with low and middle-income countries has been highly effective in contributing to remarkable achievements in global development. This response will illustrate some of the ways in which UK ODA-funded research has been effective in supporting development outcomes, as well as some of the UK’s research strengths which amplify this impact.

However, it is important to note from the outset that the UK government departments and agencies involved in ODA-funded research have different competencies and approaches, which can be used in different ways to address contemporary development challenges. For example, DHSC have expertise in health systems, UKRI Research Councils in interdisciplinary and transformational research, and DFID in humanitarian and development impact. These different competencies do not easily lend themselves to simple comparison, but instead highlight the importance of coordination, coherence and shared learning across (as well as within) the different actors. UK departments and agencies recognise this and have worked together in many different partnerships for many years. UKCDR is itself one example of such cross-Government coordination which has been used extensively to enhance UK development research policy and practices, over many years.

The UK has long been a global leader in international development research. UK-funded research has been effective in achieving a global impact, both in terms of direct human development and influence on policy geared towards meeting the SDGs across the spectrum of international development. Over the last 50 years UK-led research has contributed to significant global advances, including the dramatic reduction of child mortality from malaria and eradication of rinderpest, a devastating livestock disease. UK research has deployed “social science and humanities intelligence” to ensure these breakthroughs benefit targeted communities. UKCDR is currently producing 11 case studies to showcase the nature and impact of the UK’s engagement with the world through research. These case studies demonstrate that innovations and breakthroughs in the natural and social sciences are as vital as the UK’s demonstrated political will in setting the global agenda for sustainable development. The case studies include (but are not limited to):

- How UK research has been central to revealing the alarming extent of violence against women, and is now firmly embedded in international efforts to combat it;
- How the climate science behind the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports has shaped the global discourse on climate and provided the basis for international action;
- How the 2014-16 West African Ebola crisis was contained by combining biomedical interventions with social science intelligence; and
- How collaborations between researchers and revenue officials can guide bold reforms with big impacts, boosting domestic revenue mobilisation to finance the SDGs in Africa.

The full case studies are expected to be published in early summer 2020.

Most countries now recognise the importance of a strong research and innovation system to economic prosperity, social improvement and wellbeing. The UK is highly regarded for the strength of its research and innovation system and is a desired partner of choice for many developing countries. DFID, like other funders of ODA research such as UKRI and DHSC, enhances the

¹ IDC, Definition and Administration of ODA, (2018), <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/international-development-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/administration-of-oda-inquiry/>

effectiveness of its research in many ways, including through supporting innovative and interdisciplinary research, and supporting research capacity strengthening activities in developing countries.

- **Innovative and interdisciplinary research** brings together teams of scientists, clinicians, engineers, economists, linguists, historians and anthropologists that integrate different tools, concepts, theories and perspectives to solve complex challenges. For example, in a world increasingly characterised by urban living, the UK has played a pivotal role in advancing an interdisciplinary “New Urban Agenda”, which has alerted local authorities across the world to the possibilities for a safer, more resilient and participatory urban future. UKCDR’s recently commissioned report on the [Built Environment](#) highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary research in understanding the complexity of urban systems, and human interactions with the built environment, to achieve the SDGs.
- **Research capacity strengthening** can be defined as “any effort to increase the ability of individuals and institutions to undertake high quality research and to engage with the wider community of stakeholders”.² Recognising that researchers in low- and middle-income countries are best placed to identify and address challenges in their own nations, UK ODA-funded research from DFID, like other government departments and cross-government funds (for example, UKRI’s GCRF Growing Research Capability call), actively seeks to increase research capacity in LMICs and both the number and quality of the partnerships in the research which it funds. UKCDR’s report on [UK-funded fellowships and scholarships for Africa](#) found that in 2014-2019 DFID, BEIS, DHSC, FCO and the Wellcome Trust collectively invested over £190m supporting 5,633 African fellows and scholars. UKCDR convenes a [Research Capacity Strengthening Group \(RCSG\)](#) to bring together UK research funders and practitioners to share, learn, connect and improve practice.

How transparent is the UK aid spent by the Department for International Development (DFID) compared to aid allocated to other Government departments and to the cross-Government funds?

DFID performs very well when its transparency is compared to that of other major development agencies internationally. The 2018 Aid Transparency Index, by Publish What You Fund, gave DFID an aid transparency score of 90.9 out of 100.³ This ranked DFID as the third most transparent major development agency out of the 45 that were assessed, behind the Asia Development Bank (98.6) and UNDP (95.4), and it was only European donor to be included in the “very good” category. The Index did not evaluate any of the other UK Government departments and cross-Government funds departments that are responsible for ODA-funded research. However, the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI), which collects and reports on compliance with its IATI data standards across over 1,100 organisations globally, ranks all three of the UK’s largest funders of ODA research (DFID, BEIS and DHSC) within the top 10% of the 1,113 global organisations assessed at the time of writing (20/04/2020).⁴

² ESSENCE, Seven principles for strengthening research capacity in low- and middle-income countries: simple ideas in a complex world (2014), http://eulachealth.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/ESSENCE_7Principles_Final.pdf

³ Publish What you Fund, The 2018 Aid Transparency Index, (2018), <https://www.publishwhatyoufund.org/the-index/2018/>

⁴ IATI Standard Publishing Statistics Dashboard, Summary Statistics, http://publishingstats.iatistandard.org/summary_stats.html [date accessed 20/04/2020]

Like all major ODA funders of research, DFID publishes data on each of its ODA-funded projects (including research programmes). DFID uses the Development Tracker website for all ODA-funded projects, which includes (but is not limited to) information on project timeline, budget and spend to date, sectors involved, objectives, reviews of project performance and evaluation, and pre- and post-project impact appraisals. The site also includes data on projects by other government departments and partners, as well as aggregated project budgets for the top sectors and countries supported. In addition, DFID publishes outputs of its ODA-funded research programmes on the Research for Development repository. Other government departments and cross-government funds also publish data on their research projects in specific portals. For example, UKRI uses the Gateway to Research website, which was developed as part of BEIS' Innovation and Research Strategy, to enable users to search and analyse information about publicly funded research from across its research councils. Information on research projects funded by DHSC is published on the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) website.

Amongst the major funders of ODA-funded research, there are also ongoing activities to further increase transparency. Through UKCDR funder fora, consultations and events, the largest government funders of research for international development – DFID, BEIS, DHSC, UKRI - come together with other major international development research funders and delivery partners to share updates on their work, best practice and accountability, and to work collaboratively to improve international development outcomes. UKCDR also provides additional mapping and analysis of research funding for international development across the government departments with specific geographic (for example, UKCDR's reports on UK research funding for development in [Kenya](#), [Nigeria](#) and [South Africa](#)) or thematic focuses (for example, UKCDR's report on the UK research funding landscape for [antimicrobial resistance in international development](#)) and on high-priority emerging crises (for example, convening an [Epidemics Preparedness and Response Group](#) and developing a live global [COVID-19 Research Project Tracker](#)). In addition, UKCDR is working with its members to improve alignment between their data collection and storage, to promote transparency and comparability.

The UK Government has a commitment to open access, which gives advantage to researchers within low resource countries and institutions who might otherwise struggle to access well-founded libraries and information services.

How should the national interest be defined, and what weight should it be given, in relation to targeting UK aid?

In a world that is more interdependent now than ever, it is important when defining the national interest to consider the importance of tackling global development issues. Research for international development has a crucial role to play in promoting greater security both for the UK and overseas, and in supporting the UK to achieve its international commitments. In addition, the UK has important national capability – that is, areas where it is recognised for its distinctive contribution to, and traction on, global development challenges. Development research and innovation is one example of strong national capability, where the UK is seen as a global leader and partner of choice.

International development challenges are increasingly global, interconnected and complex. From climate change and infectious diseases to the impacts of poverty, conflict and food insecurity, it is clear that the causes and impacts of many of the greatest global challenges are not limited to national boundaries. By understanding and responding to these global challenges, in partnership

with low- and middle-income countries, the UK can support greater security and resilience for the UK and overseas. This approach is also crucial to support the UK in achieving its international commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Agreement, the Sendai Framework and many more. The SDGs are an excellent example of this. The 2030 Agenda emphasises that the 17 integrated SDGs, 169 associated targets and means of implementation are “universal, indivisible and interlinked”. As such they are some of the most intellectually challenging issues the world faces. To tackle them we need to bring together international collaborations, world-class research and input across multiple disciplines, and UK research, with its history of global leadership in this area, has a key contribution to make.

The UK and international research response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is a clear example of the vital role of research in tackling a global challenge that also falls within the UK’s national interest. In a time of global crisis, it is of critical importance that funders come together to ensure research is coordinated and aligned with global research priorities to support rapid and effective epidemic preparedness and response. UKCDR has been bringing together UK research funders of epidemics research in its [Epidemics Preparedness and Response Group](#), and has helped to coordinate UK research funders in relation to COVID-19 research investments in LMICs. Recognising the importance of accessible, comprehensive and coherent information on what and where others are investing, UKCDR has also published a [COVID-19 Research Project Tracker](#) in partnership with the Global Research Collaboration for Infectious Disease Preparedness (GloPID-R). The tracker is a live database which provides an overview of research projects across the world mapped against the priorities identified in the WHO Coordinated Global Research Roadmap: 2019 Novel Coronavirus. It supports funders in maximising the value of research investments by helping to identify gaps or duplication and inform or direct future investments.

Concluding remarks

For over a decade, UKCDR has brought UK research funders together to discuss priorities and coordinate efforts to garner maximum impact in international development. Based on UKCDR’s convening, mapping and analysis activities, we put forward the following key messages to support the IDC’s inquiry into the effectiveness of UK aid:

- Research and innovation have a crucial role to play in improving the effectiveness of UK Aid.
- DFID, and other UK government departments, perform well in international comparisons of the transparency of aid for international development. UKCDR facilitates and supports several initiatives to further develop that transparency in UK Aid spend on research.
- In a world that is more interdependent now than ever, it is important when defining the national interest to consider the importance of tackling global development issues.
- Research for international development has a crucial role to play in supporting greater security both for the UK and overseas.

UKCDR is happy to provide follow-up information or oral evidence, as required by the Committee.