
UK international development white paper: call for evidence

Response from the British Academy

September 2023

About the British Academy

The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences. We mobilise these disciplines to understand the world and shape a brighter future. From artificial intelligence to climate change, from building prosperity to improving well-being – today's complex challenges can only be resolved by deepening our insight into people, cultures and societies. We invest in researchers and projects across the UK and overseas, engage the public with fresh thinking and debates, and bring together scholars, government, business and civil society to influence policy for the benefit of everyone.

About this submission

This submission represents the views of the British Academy, not one specific individual. We would be pleased to further discuss any elements of the response.

Question 1

- How do partnerships need to change to restore the credibility of international development and the multilateral system and regain the trust of Global South?
- What role should the UK play in this and what specifically should we do differently?
- What should we do to ensure we are listening better to those most in need?

The UK Government's cuts to ODA in 2020 caused severe reputational damage, within both the UK and international R&D communities. There is much work to be done to rebuild the trust in the relationships affected by these cuts and the ongoing reduction of ODA funding, but there are some clear steps that can be taken to achieve this:

- Restoring the ODA budget to 0.7% of GNI with immediate effect. This would provide direct and tangible benefits to those most in need.
- Providing long-term funding certainty and stability for international R&D funding supported through ODA. Preferably, this would be a five-year ringfenced spending settlement at the next spending review. Research funding organisations like the British Academy require certainty and advance notice of forthcoming spend in order to plan programmes and provide the requisite lead-in times to optimise productive research collaboration. Limiting time and resources only benefits those who already hold a privileged position, with their own established networks, and reduces the quality of the work produced.
- Regaining the trust of Global South partners when undertaking international research and development. When work is undertaken to ensure that partnerships are fair and are not founded on knowledge extraction or inequitable working practices, clear benefits to both the UK and international research communities are seen. The recent Research Quality++ component of the ongoing GCRF evaluation found that not working equitably negatively affects the intended impact of the research. Similarly, the evaluation of the British Academy's GCRF [Cities and Infrastructure](#) programme highlighted the value of equitable partnerships, with one non-UK researcher noting that the programme's success was in part due to the fact that it was 'correctly responding to a growing need for global problems to be tackled through equitable partnerships in which researchers from the UK and the Global South respect and complement each other's expertise.'
- Working with governments and research funders in the Global South to enhance investment in and strengthen systems to develop R&D.
- Encouraging researchers to design their research programmes to include, in a genuine way, partners that fall outside of institutional and disciplinary silos. There is a wealth of expertise to be found in the Global South within organisations like NGOs and in terms of non-academic stakeholders, while the benefits of interdisciplinary work range from capacity building to positioning for use. The challenges faced in low- and middle-income countries are complex and varied – truly collaborative, equitable research is needed to tackle them, with priorities co-designed between the UK and the Global South. The GCRF evaluation found that the Fund's signature investments 'offered unique R&I opportunities in terms of their ambition, scale, scope and promotion of interdisciplinary and intersectoral work on development challenges. [They] demonstrated how a programmatic approach could bring additional benefits to the research-led approach implied by the Haldane Principle by prioritising key fundamentals for development impact, such as a focus on gender and inclusion, fairness in partnerships, and stakeholder networks, and cascading these from programme to award level.'

Question 2

- What are the specific innovative proposals that can accelerate progress in international development?
- What initiatives, policies, partnerships, or technologies could result in accelerated progress?
- Are there big ideas on which the UK is particularly well placed to play a role?

Providing the certainty of funding and the timescales needed to allow for the meaningful development of networks and learning between the UK and Global South partners is crucial. The innovation and progress that is required is returning UK international development to a stable, long-term funding environment.

Much momentum and potential has been lost with the termination of the GCRF, with the Fund's evaluation setting out that 'delays and reprofiling of resources have meant that many awards have not delivered the level of outputs and results that were expected, and impact-oriented activities have been curtailed'. The reduction in the expected impacts will have a detrimental effect on the progress of the LMICs towards tackling some of the most intractable global development challenges faced today, which by their very nature are long-lasting and complex.

Supporting greater enabling of in-country led projects and partnering with in-country funding agencies to run programmes, such as the British Academy has done working with the National Research Foundation in South Africa, including ensuring that there is the capacity in place in the UK to support such activity. In addition, a shift in the incentives underlying international collaboration will be important. For example, research income should not be the sole metric that UK-based researchers are measured on. Developing additional metrics that valued how funding flowed to ODA eligible countries would provide a better understanding of international collaboration and equitable partnership. This is something that could be considered in processes such as the Research Excellence Framework.

Supporting the next generation of researchers and policymakers is also crucial for securing progress in international development, and the inclusion of the Tomorrow's Talent pillar under the ISPF is important and should be continued in further funding settlements. This capacity building is key, and while UK-based researchers are particularly well placed to play a role here, it is important to note that a focus on capacity building and knowledge exchange facilitates the flow of knowledge in both directions. Such dedicated investments also build the foundations of the research system on which future initiatives can build and benefit from. Indeed, the higher-scoring awards in the recent GCRF evaluation demonstrated that 'capabilities were built in the UK as well as LMICs', thus signalling the mutual benefits of undertaking research for development. In the development of programmes of research, UK researchers should be informed by their in-country partners to set out the key priorities for R&D, thus coming together in the government's desired 'renewed global effort'.

Furthermore, the importance of mobilising the SHAPE disciplines in tandem with STEM is widely recognised. The evaluation of the British Academy's GCRF Cities and Infrastructure programme acknowledged the value of SHAPE in research for international development, noting that 'the Academy's purview ... [shows] the value of humanities and social science research to provide helpful solutions to people's lives'. The British Academy continues to advocate for a SHAPE focus to inform the current Government priorities as set out in the Science and Technology Framework.

Question 3

- What new ideas for development cooperation would make the biggest impact in, or for, low income countries?
- What are the best ideas to accelerate progress for middle income countries which still have large numbers of poor people?

An effective mechanism for accelerating progress for LMICs is providing programmes offering capacity building and knowledge systems strengthening. The British Academy has run such programmes, which provide LMIC institutions with the means to build institutional capacity and strengthen their research base, as with our [Education Research in Conflict and Crisis](#) and [Writing Workshops](#) programmes. These interventions empower LMIC researchers and institutions, equipping them with the skills and knowledge needed to take forward research on their own terms, and as such they align with one of the stated objectives of the [Integrated Review Refresh](#), which is to make the case for ‘a secure, collaborative approach to science that ensures low- and middle-income countries have access to knowledge and resources that can support improved [global] resilience’.

A necessary part of working to improve global resilience involves allowing space for the production of more ‘non-formal’ outputs and working with a wide variety of stakeholders, including those embedded in the local context. This can be incredibly impactful in terms of inclusivity and sustainability in partner countries, as noted in the GCRF evaluation, which identified that the awards most likely to perform strongly in terms of direct applicability to development challenges were those ‘with a broad range of non-formal research outputs’. These outputs might range from street theatre to reach largely illiterate local communities, to games, visual exhibitions, or blogs. The evaluation also found that ‘A solid understanding of local contexts went hand in hand with the active engagement of local partners and the will for strong partnerships. Local understanding meant much more potential for carrying out research that could be used.’ This highlights also the need for greater language provision and [building languages capability in the UK](#).

Additionally, it is important to offer funding for research and development of varying scales: awards of only a few thousand pounds have much to offer alongside multi-million pound initiatives, and in fact these smaller programmes are repeatedly shown to provide excellent value for money and impressive amounts of impact for their size. The evaluation of the British Academy’s [Writing Workshops](#) programme (offering awards of up to £20,000 at that time to support early career researchers to stimulate professional networks, develop research partnerships, encourage skills development, provide advice on career development and promote the uptake of research), which first emerged over ten years ago in response to the recommendations of the [Nairobi Process](#), demonstrates the excellent value for money that these smaller programmes provide, noting that ‘capacity-building towards which it contributes will assist Global South researchers tackling challenges such as SDGs in their own, context-appropriate ways.’ The latest instalment of the GCRF evaluation notes that ‘awards of a range of sizes can effectively promote capacity enhancement’, and this theme is expanded in the evaluation of the British Academy’s GCRF [Cities and Infrastructure](#) programme, which recommends providing follow-on funding to awards, to allow project teams to continue to nurture the networks, partnerships, and research communities they had built up by that point, and to provide sustainability for the future.

Question 4

- How can Official Development Assistance (ODA) be most effectively targeted and built upon?
- How can non-ODA financing be mobilised to ensure ambitious, innovative, and transformational international development?

The UK government's commitment to ODA is vital, and the UK should return ODA spend to 0.7% GNI as soon as possible. There is immense value and importance in ODA R&D, with research projects funded with ODA producing a wide range of tangible impacts on the most intractable global development challenges. The effect of the ODA cuts has been felt in terms of the outcomes and impacts emerging from awards funded, with many collaborations under GCRF, for example, as a result of the cuts not delivering what they had intended.

For maximum impact, ODA needs to be delivered in a timely fashion and trust in relationships needs to be rebuilt. Enabling leadership and grant holding in LMICs will help to support partner countries to grow their R&D ecosystems sustainably as they work towards tackling such global development challenges as climate change, education, and extreme poverty. A critical element of this is providing support to build LMIC institutions research office capacity and developing capacity in UK institutions' professional services so that staff are better able to support collaborative international research. This is particularly crucial following the ODA cuts with the potential for progress that had been made being lost due to the significant disruption the cuts created.

It is also of the utmost importance to build in time for these interventions: a frequent refrain of award holders funded under ODA programmes has been that they required more time to fully capitalise on the networks they had forged, and to ensure that their outputs would lead to the impacts as planned, which often take time to emerge. The [Writing Workshops](#) award holders spoke of the importance of building and nurturing 'intellectual kinship' to enable long-term, trusting relationships. With our GCRF [Urban Infrastructures of Wellbeing](#) programme, and subsequent rounds of the Writing Workshops, we were able to respond to the views of the previous award holders by building in more time: we increased the duration of Urban Infrastructures awards from 16 to 21 months, and have increased our Writing Workshops awards from one to now two years in duration, to enable and acknowledge the significant follow-on and follow-up activities that a successful Writing Workshop award will need to undertake. More time also allows for the development of greater impact.

Question 5

- How should scientific and technological expertise, private finance and the private sector, trade and investment, civil society networks and diplomacy be engaged to support global development action and accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

Accelerating progress towards the SDGs requires collective action, a wide network of expertise from varied academic and social backgrounds working in concert and finding ways to integrate their different perspectives and expertise, and the coordination of relevant actors to harness knowledge, and generate and implement feasible plans and projects that advance sustainable development. Scientific expertise, which vitally includes social sciences and humanities, is necessary to create the conditions for a fairer and more sustainable world and has the power to strengthen innovation and action to tackle the SDGs.

Close collaboration between researchers, civil society organisations and governments to make the connection between abstract goals and lived realities [are also important to make the SDGs respond](#)

better to the lives of the world's most marginalised people, in a real attempt to leave no one behind. Indeed, unless governments, civil society organisations, and other actors combine qualitative and perception with quantitative data, they will only know who they are reaching but not who they are missing – and why.

Engaging cross-sector multiple stakeholders is important to foster partnerships, however, multi-stakeholder partnerships can locate power with governments of the Global North and reduce those in the Global South to symbolic partners, which does little to engage stakeholders globally to work towards achieving the SDGs. An increased focus is required in ensuring that partnerships are equitable. Further work to embed and extend best practice related to equitable partnership in international development R&D is an area of potential leadership for the UK working with and listening to counterparts globally. Engaging in bottom-up activities can provide a voice to those on the ground and hold Governments to account for their promises under the SDGs.

As an example, while the FCDO-supported Girls Education Challenge is the largest programme to support girls education interventions, working directly towards SDGs 4, 5, and 10, it has been stated that their approach to partnerships is centred on a hierarchical view of development assistance with expertise and financing flowing from the Global North to the Global South, an emphasis on 'what works' rather than what matters or what connects, and limited thinking about sustainability. Thus, it is critical that both governments and organisations rethink partnerships, while also investing in further research and evidence in these areas.

Much can be learnt from the UK-based non-profit AgDevCo who adopted a long-term investment strategy, 'patient-capital' to support agribusinesses in Africa and reduce rural poverty. Notably, the direct interaction between the non-profit, its subsidiaries and local business actors in the five countries created a network of communication, interdependence, and reliance on expertise from private finance, trade and investment and science and technologies. Thus, engagement of multi-sector stakeholders with local knowledge and expertise, including civil society networks, must be encouraged by governments. The concerted effort of cross-sector actors and local players allows for a holistic approach to support global development action to accelerate progress towards the SDGs.

Question 6

- How can progress on tackling ending poverty, economic growth, and the challenges of climate change be best brought together, in the context of Agenda 2030 (including building resilience, adaptation, and sustainable growth)?
- How can the opportunities be maximised? How can the limits and trade-offs be managed?

In addition to being large challenges in themselves, climate change, conflict, poverty, food security, and health all interact within complex systems, in which there are interlocking drivers at multiple scales, interactions, and outcomes. Disasters from natural and anthropogenic hazards can reverse development gains and weaken resilience to disaster risks, particularly in the Global South, leading to increased poverty. Disaster displacement is also a major challenge and substantially affects a community's economic growth. Thus, climate mitigation alone cannot protect vulnerable people - there should be increased focus on adaptation, gender-specific responses, early warning systems, global scale collaboration, ongoing social and economic transformation and enhancing resilience to the emerging climate crisis.

Ensuring just transitions while tackling climate change and biodiversity loss is key to supporting inclusive economies and societies in the future, as well as in the context of Agenda 2030. Integrating and investing in evidence from the social sciences and humanities is also critical to this work. It must be acknowledged that definitions of and timescales for just transitions are specific and sensitive to place so that transitions towards decarbonisation capitalise on a country's regional or sectoral strengths. Therefore to maximise opportunities and co-benefits, community-focused participatory approaches must be prioritised to ensure transparent communication and long-term engagement.

It is also important to acknowledge that today's young people and future generations are set to observe and experience the worsening impacts of climate change, exacerbated by a concentration of poverty and worklessness in the regions where vulnerability to climate change is particularly acute. To address this, those most impacted should be meaningfully involved in defining the problem, seeking solutions, implementing change, and ensuring accountability. Addressing transitions of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality employment are also integral to the success of just transitions and particularly in international contexts with high levels of poverty, the worst affected people should be prioritised for resources, training, and jobs to meet their basic needs, protect their human rights, and thus enhance resilience now and in the future.

Nature-based Solutions (NbS) provide a clear bridge between biodiversity and climate change action and bringing these agendas together is key. NbS can also provide a much wider range of benefits, which can create a society that is resilient and better placed to cope with climate-related shocks and stresses that in effect leads to decreased poverty and economic growth. These may include biodiversity conservation as a basis for healthy ecosystems; food security; and health, wellbeing and social connectivity. Restoration of nature also protects many existing jobs which are threatened by the increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters and impacts of climate change on productivity and working conditions, further stimulating a country's economic growth.

Question 7

- What are the top priorities for strengthening multilateral effectiveness in international development?
- What are the issues and challenges most suited to bilateral cooperation (considering all levers)?

Multilateralism provides a range of tools to further gains in international development and should continue to be invested in, particularly as investing in the institutions and practices which provide a platform for intelligent, constructive diplomacy can be viewed as long-term strategic relationship-building. The UK's participation in multilateral efforts allows Britain to demonstrate its expertise, maintain its international reputation, and solidify its role as a global leader in areas such as in research and innovation, which are capable of furthering the UK government's international development goals and allows the UK the opportunity to take part in coordinating international action and policy on issues of major importance. Participating in these networks also offers the UK the ability to shape the agendas and rules of powerful international bodies. Bilateral cooperation can also prove to be a useful tool, particularly in circumstances that require tough and fast decisions.

When developing international development programmes and long-term strategies for transformation, local voices should be consulted and integrated alongside international actors. Local knowledge of infrastructure, needs, cultural norms and law ensures programmes are context-specific, in the interests of those impacted by the interventions, and are not in opposition to local or national policies that would reduce their overall sustainability. Additionally, it is critical to tailor

development initiatives to fit each individual context. It is also highly beneficial to find ways to empower local and national actors as part of the programmes.

At the same time, multilateral efforts must be cognisant of national and local divides that could complicate the provision of aid and lead to increased instability. Without mutually reinforcing relationships and connections built and sustained, there is a risk of emerging fault lines in societies that can lead to violent political conflict. Relatedly, there should be a push for increased transparency as it relates to decision making and prioritisation.