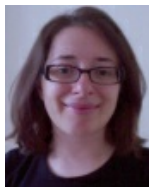


# Greater than the sum of its parts: why the GCRF Interdisciplinary Research Hubs should adopt a programme approach to research design and management



*Awards for the GCRF Interdisciplinary Research Hubs will soon be announced. Each of these Hubs will inevitably have to balance the different imperatives of research excellence, development impact, and collaborative processes. To improve their chances of being successful in doing so, **Valeria Izzi** and **Becky Murray** suggest that each Hub must set out with the explicit intention of being greater than the sum of its parts, and adopt a “programme approach” to research design and management.*

It is with great anticipation that many universities across the UK await results of the second and final round of selection following the [GCRF Interdisciplinary Research Hubs call](#). From a [shortlist of 52 projects \(from 34 UK institutions\)](#), up to 15 Hubs will be chosen to carry out interdisciplinary, impact-focused research, in partnership with Southern institutions, to address intractable challenges faced by developing countries, receiving between £8m and £20m over a five-year period. Starting in December 2018, the selected Hubs will face the exciting and daunting task of delivering on their applications’ promise of [research for development](#).

As discussed previously, the different imperatives of research excellence, development impact, and collaborative processes can often [give rise to trade-offs](#), which are particularly tricky to navigate within the limited timeframe and budget of any single research project. One of the many exciting things about the GCRF Hubs is their potential to overcome these trade-offs, thanks to their wider scale and greater resources, and to truly seize the elusive win-wins of collaborative research for development impact. We suggest that, for this to happen, each Hub must set out with the explicit intention to be greater as a whole than the sum of its parts, and adopt a “programme approach” to research design and management.

Our view comes from the experience of the recently concluded [Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation \(ESPA\) programme](#) – a nine-year, £43.9m collaboration between Department for International Development (DFID), the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). ESPA showed the value and challenges of implementing a programme approach at the crossroads of scientific research and international development impact. While there are clear differences between ESPA and the Hubs (in terms of thematic scope, duration, and management arrangements), there are nonetheless a number of transferable lessons we would like to share here.

As a programme, ESPA had one overarching goal: [“to ensure that ecosystems will be conserved and managed more sustainably – in ways that alleviate poverty and enhance wellbeing”](#). Over its lifetime, ESPA funded 125 projects, ranging from blue-sky research to impact-focused grants. Each of these projects was a “research unit” in itself, delivering research results and impact, but also a small piece of a larger jigsaw puzzle, working to achieve the overarching objective.

While the ESPA Directorate supported project teams to enhance the impact of their individual projects, it also worked to create “value added”. It facilitated collaboration and cross-fertilisation among projects, bringing people together and fostering a sense of community among researchers. It supported the synthesis of evidence emerging from different projects, putting together the different pieces of the puzzle to facilitate the emergence of an aggregate picture – a daunting task, but an essential one for evidence to inform global-level policies. And it enabled the emergence of a legacy for the ESPA investment, which is a linked suite of positive assets and effects that are sustained beyond the programme funding period.

[Crucial to this was the use of a programme-wide Theory of Change \(ToC\)](#) to guide strategic programme management, focus minds on the need to respond to real-world opportunities to influence decision-makers, and inspire the design of project-level ToCs. Specifying the purpose, roles, and responsibilities of the various stakeholders was critically important because a strong focus on impact was new to many ESPA academics – plus many of ESPA's larger projects could be considered as “mini-programmes” in their own right, as they included different research components and country teams.

Each GCRF Hub will be similarly complex, involving many teams in different countries. While the disciplinary, geographical, and operational configuration will vary from one Hub to another, the common denominator is the presence of different research streams, pursuing different objectives while at the same time all converging towards and contributing to the Hub's overall objective. This will inevitably present challenges for the Hub leadership: how to conceptualise and communicate a shared impact vision to relevant stakeholders so that everyone is pulling in the same direction? How to be “relevant” at the local level while also maintaining cross-site comparability? How to deliver academic excellence whilst delivering development impact?

In this regard, the ESPA experience offers three important lessons:

### **Explicitly acknowledge the potential power – but also the complexity – of a programme approach from the outset**

You need to be clear about who is expected to do what at each level and how the units will combine to make up the whole, reflecting on potential areas of tension and how these might be collaboratively resolved. Critically, this often means shaping your research offer (or at least how it is communicated) to respond more meaningfully to impact opportunities (such as relevant decision-making processes) in an appropriate and timely manner. It also means you will sometimes need to say “no” to potentially exciting opportunities – frustrating as this may be! – in order to remain focused on the bigger picture.

### **Recognise that impact won't “just happen”: it requires dedicated resources and skillsets**

Planning, disseminating, and realising an impact-focused programme approach is difficult, takes time, and requires a different skillset than “traditional” research teams. Impact will not automatically accrue at the programme level, nor will centrally produced written guidance be implemented effectively by research teams without ongoing, hands-on support provided by impact specialists.

### **Use a participatory Theory of Change to guide programme delivery**

The process of working with stakeholders to collate a participatory Theory of Change during the inception phase will help you to define long-term goals and coordinate the efforts of the units and the whole on short and medium-term activities to deliver strong impact as a legacy for the programme investment. Think of your Theory of Change as a compass, not an instruction manual. Programme and project-level Theories of Change should act as living documents that underpin and guide delivery, to be revisited and updated with relevant stakeholders on a regular basis.

The creation of these GCRF Hubs is exciting because the five-year timeline and substantive budgetary allocations provide an unprecedented opportunity to deliver measureable and sustained development impact. ESPA demonstrated that a lot can be achieved, but a programme approach requires a massive amount of dedicated planning, support, and attention, as well as a willingness on the part of academic teams to do things differently.

[Listen to Becky talk about ESPA's lessons learned on research for development impact.](#)

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

*Featured image credit: [raw pixel](#), via Unsplash (licensed under a [CC0 1.0](#) license).*

### **About the authors**

**[Valeria Izzi](#)** was the *Impact and Learning Specialist in the ESPA Directorate*. She has a background as a researcher and practitioner in international development, working with UN agencies and NGOs.

**[Becky Murray](#)** was the *Impact Manager in the ESPA Directorate*. She has a background in impact practice in the UK and internationally, having worked in the private, Government, and NGO sectors.