

Doing research for (and not on) development: some important questions for the Global Challenges Research Fund



*The Global Challenges Research Fund has an impressively wide-ranging research agenda, covering a range of development issues. But as well as funding research on development, **Ajoy Datta** argues the fund should promote understanding of how to undertake research for development too. This requires academics to have specific skills and experience of working effectively with colleagues and partners in the Global South.*

The research agenda for the [Global Challenges Research Fund \(GCRF\)](#) (set out in its [strategy](#)) is undeniably impressive, covering a wide range of development issues. But whilst UK academic institutions, the primary recipients of this £1.5 billion aid fund, have considerable experience and expertise in undertaking research *on* development policy and practice, less is known about how much they understand and do research *for* development.

The latter requires a shift amongst academics from being passive observers to taking on an active role in contexts where networks of actors with varying levels of power and capacity are competing and collaborating with one another to bring about change for specific groups of people. Accordingly, doing research for development requires specific skills, experience, and some intuition.

Some academics may have the necessary skills and experience. Others, however, may need some support. Having worked as an engagement specialist on the five-year [Earthquakes without Frontiers](#) project, I argue that a lot may be learnt by academics and institutions – both in the UK and globally – about how to go about doing research for development if the GCRF was to expand its research agenda to include the following five questions:

1. How do UK academics engage with counterparts in the Global South?
2. How do academics engage across disciplinary boundaries?
3. How do academics engage with other stakeholders such as policymakers and practitioners?
4. How do academics communicate risk and uncertainty to policymakers and practitioners?
5. How do UK academics manage, reflect on, and learn about the effects and impacts they are having (or not) on development processes in the Global South?

In answering these questions, the GCRF should explore the current state of practice (including the difficulties faced), how this is shaped by the UK academic context, and what academics, institutions, and funding bodies can realistically do differently to improve practice during the lifetime of the GCRF and beyond.

Here's my view on why these questions are important.

1. Engagement between scientists in the UK and their Southern counterparts

Scientists undertaking research for development will be tasked with working closely with counterparts in the Global South. This could entail an element of "[capacity development](#)", which might include UK academics sharing skills with researchers who can, in future, go on to undertake high-quality research on their own. Academics will be required to step back from the research process or disempower themselves and help others to take a lead instead. But this might not come easily as a researcher's identity is often shaped by the need to do research (and not necessarily help others to do so).

To add to this, colleagues in the Global South might think and act differently to scientists in the UK because of their particular socio-cultural contexts. Good communication is important in negotiating difference. However, most UK academics will require counterparts to converse with them in English, which may only be a second or third language for some. Moreover, counterparts will be compelled to co-author publications in English. Both these issues together may create basic communication challenges (or [sway UK academics to work with counterparts who have an ability to speak English but may not be intellectually sound](#)). Negotiating research processes and outputs with Southern partners clearly requires energy as well as patience.

But with UK scientists often under pressure to complete research projects in short timeframes, publish in leading journals, and secure promotion, they may be tempted to take a largely extractive and/or contractual approach, leaving Southern counterparts to introduce them to key informants and/or collect and provide data, whilst credit for the final outputs is taken by those from the UK. In some cases, UK scientists may simply not have an appreciation for how they might work in partnership with local stakeholders.

2. Engagement between scientists from different disciplines

In some cases, researchers from different disciplines may need to develop a shared conceptual framework that draws together discipline-specific theories, concepts, approaches, knowledge, and experiences to address specific problems. However, [this is not easy to do](#). It relies on trust and a willingness to work together, especially when things get difficult. The depth of commitment and strength of personal relationships needed for successful interdisciplinarity is often underestimated and sufficient resources to do this (time, energy, financial) as well as good leadership are also necessary.

Scientists from one discipline may not see what scientists from another discipline can offer to understanding of a policy problem and finding solutions. Institutional barriers to working across disciplines are numerous, including constraints in applying for grants, seeking promotions, or submitting papers to high-impact journals. Scientists may prefer to work with colleagues at their own institution rather than those who might be a train journey away. There is also stigma around those who “straddle disciplinary boundaries”, as the university system puts pressure on individual academics to specialise in order to climb the ladder and draw respect from fellow academics and funders.

3. Engagement between scientists and other stakeholders

Promoting research impact requires engagement with stakeholders across various levels of governance (at national as well as community level) and at different stages of the research process to ensure key policy questions are addressed. However, some researchers may not be comfortable doing this or feel their role is purely to observe and analyse; “participating” in uptake activities might be seen to compromise their neutrality. Further, scientists may simply lack sufficient time for engagement or see it in narrow terms, as an opportunity to educate, teach, or inform stakeholders about their work rather than as a joint exploration of the policy dimensions of academic concepts. Others may lack the facilitation and/or management skills to effectively engage with stakeholders, and it is often unclear where or how scientists can acquire support or training in these areas.

4. Communicating risk and uncertainty

Stakeholders, particularly policymakers, have a thirst for certainty in the information they acquire. But virtually all research and proposed solutions will be characterised by some level of uncertainty. This is particularly so in relation to, for instance, increasing resilience to natural hazards as well as climate change. To deal with uncertainty, stakeholders often rely on intuitive approaches to making decisions, which can work but often lead to inconsistencies and errors of judgement. Risk (and probability) then becomes an important measure. But stakeholders’ perception of risk and uncertainty is influenced by how it is communicated.

The use of one-way communication, using technical language and scientific notation, is likely to be a turn-off to audiences. Stakeholders are more likely to engage through two-way interactive dialogue, learning by doing, hands-on exercises. How risk is framed – including the choice of words, numbers, and pictures – can also be influential. Preferences and understandings of uncertainties will vary among different stakeholders, whilst their reactions to narratives about uncertainties are likely to be influenced by their gender, cultural, and other factors. And finally, providing risk information that is relevant to the time horizons (short, medium, long-term) of specific groups (policymakers, NGOs, communities) can also be challenging.

5. Management, learning and accountability

Given the GCRF is a UK aid fund, it is not surprising that aid management discourse and processes (including terms such as “theory of change”, “stakeholders”, “adaptive management”, or “impact”) are increasingly being adopted by academics. But to what extent are academics comfortable with this? And have they made explicit their understandings of these terms and identified implications for their practice?

Academics working in consortia cannot be expected to get things right first time. Some element of learning by doing is required. This is more likely to happen if formal spaces for reflection are built into research processes to help academics learn about what they are doing together and what effects this is having on the stakeholders and partners they're working with. But this isn't straightforward. Bringing a diverse group of people together can be politically and logistically challenging. Also, academics' other commitments do not always allow them to attend meetings regularly, whilst such meetings may be seen as "talking shops" and of limited value.

Finally, the significant focus on accountability in the aid sector has put pressure on academics to make claims about what they intend to do and what they have achieved in relation to the lives of specific individuals and communities, the actions of policymakers, and the relationships between them. Moreover, funders may not want to know about some of the more tricky or unsavoury elements of facilitating change. What challenges does this throw up for academics? How do they deal with this?

By promoting research and learning in these five areas and documenting how academics go about negotiating some of the difficulties described, the GCRF can go a long way in promoting good practice in doing research *for* development.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, 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: [Arthur Edelman](#), licensed under a [CC0 1.0](#) license.

About the author

Ajoy Datta is a Research Associate at On Think Tanks and the Overseas Development Institute. He has worked for 16 years in international development with a focus on improving policy influencing, decision-making and management practices.