

# Global Challenges Research Fund: Challenge Leaders Initiative

## Executive Summary

This summary presents findings from the 2021 process evaluation of the Global Challenges Research Fund's Challenge Leaders Initiative.

The Global Challenges Research Fund is a £1.5 billion fund overseen by the UK Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS). GCRF supports pioneering research and innovation that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries. The GCRF evaluation examines the fund's Theory of Change, from activities to impacts, over a five-year period running from 2020 to 2025. This process evaluation focused on the Challenge Leaders (CLs) initiative, a GCRF 'signature investment' aimed at improving the targeting

**The evaluation found that the Challenge Leaders initiative had partial success as a strategic structure with a clear vision and as intellectual leaders for thematic portfolios; the challenge leaders worked well as a cohort. Their personal networks were seen as key assets contributing to progress towards key GCRF outcomes. However, ambiguity about the role and unclear structures for delivering on the vision constrained the potential for stronger strategic coordination across the complicated GCRF delivery architecture.**

and strategic direction of UK Research and Innovation's (UKRI's) GCRF portfolio.

**GCRF evaluation:** The purpose of GCRF's evaluation is to assess the extent to which

GCRF has contributed to its objectives and impact. The overall GCRF evaluation takes a theory-based design, tracking the GCRF ToC over the life of the fund. The evaluation is conducted over five years and across three stages. This report focuses on Stage 1b (2021–22), involving six process evaluations of GCRF's signature investments, including the CL initiative. It seeks to answer the overarching evaluation question: *How are GCRF's signature investments working, and what have they achieved?*

**Overview of the CL initiative:** In 2017 UKRI introduced six distinct interdisciplinary GCRF portfolios on global health, food systems, conflict, resilience, education and sustainable cities. This was partly in response to the Rapid Review by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI), published in 2017, criticising the apparent lack of strategic focus and scattered portfolio of projects. As part of this, nine CLs were appointed to provide intellectual and strategic leadership for each strategic research portfolio and to strengthen the coordination across multiple delivery partners (DPs).

### Evaluation findings

**A clear vision for the CLs was only partially supported by structures and processes to support challenge-led research and innovation (R&I) with development impact. Key successes included working well as a**

**cohort supporting effective cross-portfolio work on equitable partnerships, although ambiguity about the CL role constrained the potential for stronger strategic coordination. (EQ 1)**

There was a clear sense among stakeholders about the broad vision for the initiative. However, structures and processes were not well defined, for both CLs and Challenge Managers (CMs). This ambiguity led to considerable variation in processes followed by different CLs. While this allowed them to respond to the needs of the portfolio, there were some perceptions that the challenge areas were too closely tied to CLs' own interests and networks.

CLs developed effective structures for working as a cohort, which led to effective cross-portfolio work, such as the UKRI Collective Programme – a series of calls reflecting GCRF development considerations – and effective, agile response to the Covid-19 pandemic. While CLs advocated strongly for more equitable partnerships with low-to-middle-income country (LMIC) institutions, their ability to effect meaningful change was constrained by UK dominance of financial and leadership structures.

**Strengthening R&I capacities in LMICs and the UK was not a significant feature of the CLs initiative, despite some clear needs identified early on, and this led to some missed opportunities. (EQ 2)**

Capacity building was not a significant feature of the CLs ToC. Analysis from the 2017 ICAI review and an initial portfolio analysis highlighted capacity needs, including cross-research council working, research ethics, interdisciplinary, challenge-led research design, and research governance capacity. There was some evidence of CLs addressing capacity needs at individual and project levels, but not at institutional or organisational levels. In addition, there was no clear evidence that fairness considerations were factored into

capacity building work, despite advocacy for equitable partnerships in other areas of CLs' work.

**The selection of academics solely from the global North was seen as a missed opportunity to bring in more diverse perspectives and networks from the global South. (EQ 3)**

The introduction of the CLs initiative at a later stage has contributed to the confusion about the role and scope of the CLs. The CL initiative was driven, in part, by the ICAI review to bring about coherence across the fund, and the appointment of CLs was a quick way to address the gap. Their personal contacts and networks were seen as a key asset and a factor contributing to the achievement of GCRF outcomes. In terms of fairness of structure and processes for UK and LMIC stakeholders, some stakeholders questioned the rationale for appointing CLs solely from the global North.

**Although there have been some constraints – some structural and some from the Covid-19 pandemic – the CLs initiative has contributed to progress towards short-term outcomes in the GCRF ToC, including widening networks of researchers and stakeholders in the UK and LMICs. (EQ 4)**

The CLs initiative has made progress towards short-term outcomes; however, the results are concentrated on a few outcomes from the ToC. Evidence of contribution to results is most visible in the short-term outcomes from the initiative's ToC: 'Increased awareness of GCRF within UK, LMIC and globally'; 'Research by cluster members informs policy and practice decisions'; and 'New strengthened relationships with researchers, policy makers and other stakeholders'. Covid-19 disrupted plans where work was either put on hold or stopped altogether. On the other hand, the pandemic also created new ways of working that further enhanced equitable

partnerships with those in the global South, although this was not universal.

**There is evidence that the lack of clarity of roles and communication worked against the effective integration of CLs into GCRF's architecture, creating barriers for effective joint working and achieving desired outcomes. (EQ 5)**

CLs were appointed as UKRI staff, and needed to integrate into the complicated architecture of GCRF to promote coordination across UKRI and other DPs. There was evidence of some tensions between CLs and DPs, brought about by the ambiguity around roles, communication and a lack of formal authority and decision-making powers. The tensions were less where there was alignment of academic disciplines between the CLs and the research councils, contributing to more positive working relations. Overall, however, while CMs were a mitigating factor to help orient and integrate CLs into UKRI's structure, the extent to which this has been successful is mixed.

**GCRF funding was seen as unique in its scale, scope and flexibility, with notable successes in promoting interdisciplinarity work and equitable partnerships between UK and Global South institutions, although the impact potential was inevitably undermined by the budget reductions in 2021. (EQ 6)**

GCRF is seen as an early leader in its championing of equitable partnerships and interdisciplinarity. Its convening power is difficult to match by any individual delivery partner. The size and scope of the fund and the flexibility it offered were seen as unique and instrumental for achieving development outcomes. There was little awareness of equivalent or alternative funding to GCRF. Where alternative funding was sought or secured, it was on a smaller scale, focused on a specific discipline, and involved more competition for funding.

The cuts were reported to have a deep and far-reaching impact. Informants, almost unanimously, said that the cuts were reputationally damaging and undermined the trust they had built with partners. Furthermore, the opportunity to secure a legacy for GCRF was lost due to the cuts, particularly where projects were just at a point to firm up the next steps.

## **Conclusions, lessons and recommendations**

By drawing on the findings from this process evaluation, we aim to answer the main evaluation question: 'How well are GCRF investments working, and what have they achieved?' within the context of the CLs initiative.

**We found while there was a clear sense among respondents of the broad vision and purpose for the CLs initiative, how CLs were intended to fulfil this vision was not well defined. Moreover, the extent to which CLs have integrated themselves into UKRI and provided coherence across DPs remains a key sticking point. Yet in spite of the lack of clarity and support mechanisms, the CLs worked well as a cohort and their personal contacts and networks were seen as a key asset and factor contributing to the achievement of GCRF outcomes. Overall, the CLs initiative has made early progress towards its desired outcomes. However, funding cuts and lack of clarity and support structure have impeded potential areas of achievements or expected outcomes.**



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