

The Global Challenges Research Fund

The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) is the UK's flagship programme for international science diplomacy. Supporting over 400 unique partnerships in 85 countries around the world, the programme has allowed the UK to leverage its status as a leading scientific nation to build and deepen ties with key partner countries in order to address global challenges, build new markets for UK exports and improve global security and influence.

The 2020 Spending Review laid bare the difficult choices facing the Government as it deals with the health and economic crises caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The value of research and innovation in spurring economic growth was recognised by the Chancellor as one of the few areas to receive a multi-year settlement. However, the Spending Review also included a temporary adjustment to the UK's aid spending and this has now translated into £120 million in cuts that will need to be applied to live R&D programmes, including the GCRF, within the next six months.

This means the immediate cancellation of ongoing projects that have been a key vehicle for advancing UK influence in R&D internationally for many years, helping to tackle pressing challenges in developing countries whilst building partnerships in new markets. The immediate withdrawal of the UK from these regions not only risks undoing years of hard work, but risks damaging the UK's global reputation as an international partner for R&D.

Key benefits of GCRF:

- **A key vehicle for overseas science diplomacy:** whilst countries such as China have been intensifying their economic and strategic links with developing nations, investing billions in areas such as Africa, the UK has used its status as a leading scientific nation to strategically enhance its soft power links. The GCRF supports projects in countries which are key targets for UK foreign diplomacy, including those highlighted in the Government's recent Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. The UK now risks withdrawing with immediate effect from live contracts with partners in areas such as the Indo-Pacific region, just at a time when UK foreign policy pivots towards strengthening links with these countries.
- **Better global security:** the GCRF supports key programmes aimed at: preventing global conflict and migration to other nations, supporting displaced populations in-country and preventing human trafficking in order to enhance UK security.
- **Enhancing the UK's reputation as a global leader in science and research:** the GCRF has enabled the UK to collaborate internationally on global challenges such as climate change, disease and anti-microbial resistance, allowing the UK to both fulfil its role in supporting the Sustainable Development Goals and to advance scientific progress in areas of national interest.
- **Building new markets for UK business:** the GCRF has allowed the UK to build sustainable R&D partnerships with emerging economic nations of the future, such as India, Nigeria and the Philippines, supporting the future development and export of products and services to emerging new markets and enhancing the global competitiveness of British companies.

Background on the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF)

The GCRF was launched in 2016 and has been a hugely successful programme. As well as addressing pressing challenges faced by developing countries, it has helped to bolster the UK's place as a world leader in development and a science superpower. As we move towards post-pandemic recovery and look to post-Brexit opportunities, the GCRF showcases our ingenuity and openness to the wider world.

The programme has allowed Russell Group universities to work with partners across the world to focus their world-class knowledge and innovation capabilities on improving global health, pioneering new technologies and supporting other nations to tackle climate change, amongst other impacts.

Some of the projects the GCRF has supported include:

- **Imperial College London** is leading a network of Russell Group universities, the NHS and partners in the US, Canada, South Africa, Zambia and Senegal to improve the use of vaccines in pregnancy and newborns. Bringing together expertise across immunology, vaccinology, social sciences, industry, and public health it aims to improve maternal and newborn health globally. The project will strengthen R&D capacity within the UK and developing nations, with implications for the implementation of vaccine programmes in high-, middle- and low-income countries
- Researchers at **Durham University** are looking at ways to better harness the potential renewable energy sources that can be found in Africa – estimated at around 55% of the world's potential renewable energy sources. The project is looking at how to support the use of wind turbines in the different ground conditions found in Africa. The project will improve the competitiveness of UK companies in the African market of renewable energy and help train the next generation of African and UK geotechnical engineers.
- The **University of Leeds** jointly leads GCRF-AFRICAP, a project helping food systems in Africa to become more productive, sustainable and resilient to climate change. GCRF-AFRICAP is creating an evidence base to support agricultural policy in Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania and Zambia further building the UK's reputation in the continent.
- Engineers at the **University of Glasgow** have developed effective, accurate and low-cost diagnosis tools for malaria and schistosomiasis for use in Sub-Saharan Africa. In addition to improving treatments for these two devastating diseases, the project - co-funded by the Department of Health with partners from British industry and charity - is providing new methods to engage with schoolchildren and the public about infectious disease.
- The **University of Cambridge** is leading a project with partners in Kenya and Rwanda to tackle virus transmission in vital crops, enhancing food security in the region and globally.

What the Russell Group is asking for

To maximise the benefit of the UK's ODA spend while also bolstering UK research and innovation, the Russell Group is asking Government to:

- **Reconsider immediate in-year cuts** to GCRF, which supports the Government's ambitions to establish the UK as a global science superpower. If this is not possible, work with the sector to look at how spending can be re-profiled to minimise the number of projects facing immediate cancellation.
- **For future financial years, fully re-commit to the GCRF in the next Spending Review** by either re-profiling ODA spending towards R&D priorities, or by re-instating previous funding levels via increases in R&D investment, in line with the Government's commitment to increase R&D investment to £22bn by 2024/25.

University of Birmingham • University of Bristol • University of Cambridge • Cardiff University • Durham University
University of Edinburgh • University of Exeter • University of Glasgow • Imperial College London • King's College London
University of Leeds • University of Liverpool • London School of Economics and Political Science
University of Manchester • Newcastle University • University of Nottingham • University of Oxford
Queen Mary University of London • Queen's University Belfast • University of Sheffield • University of Southampton
University College London • University of Warwick • University of York