

## **Global Challenges Research Fund - Funders' observations on preparing your proposal**

AHRC, BBSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC have recently supported Foundation Awards through the Global Challenges Research Fund. These general observations are provided as a guide to support applicants in preparing future GCRF proposals.

These observations are generic and being provided to all applicants to the full stage therefore comments are not specific to any application. This feedback has also been written to be useful to your colleagues and institution for other ODA multidisciplinary calls so please feel free to share it more widely. This document incorporates some feedback provided at the outline stage. Please note some of the comments are general observations and may not have been used by the panel to evaluate any application.

### **Working with ODA countries**

- Choose an eligible country from the OECD Development Assistance Committee's (DAC) list<sup>1</sup> This list changes every three years, so it is worth knowing if you are targeting an Upper Middle Income Country that it might be reclassified and removed from this list.
- Identify why this country and region have been chosen, beyond being on the DAC list. Make it clear there is an actual need or in-country demand for the research and its potential impacts, and that this is a priority for the region.
- Explain the extent to which research within ODA eligible country(s) might be sustainable beyond the lifetime of the research grant, and what approaches will drive this.
- Where the research is leading to a potential change to in-country policy or affects local economics, ensure that appropriate partners are involved (e.g. government, local/global businesses) who can ensure a pathway to impact. Where applicable state how the research fits into the particular country's policies and strategic objectives.

### **Partners**

- Clearly articulate the added value of the overseas research partners beyond providing local/ ODA eligible country expertise: particularly how the partnership (including respective roles, contributions and additional resources) will contribute to the proposed research.
- When working with overseas academics, demonstrate how this will deliver impact on the ground; i.e. what research networks and in-country contacts do they have outside academia. It is your responsibility to demonstrate the pathway to impact and how this will specifically be achieved. Just noting your partner has experience in this area is not likely to be sufficient justification.
- Where you are targeting relatively wealthy countries or large businesses it is important to

---

1

<http://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/documentupload/DAC%20List%20of%20ODA%20Recipients%202014%20final.pdf>

demonstrate how the research and impact of the research will benefit target populations, e.g. more jobs, better pay, cheaper food etc.

- Be clear who the beneficiaries are, what track record you or your partners have in delivering impact to these beneficiaries, how this will benefit them, and how this research will benefit the wider population.
- Support the country you are working with to co-create solutions rather than imposing what you think is a solution. Partners are more likely to be aware of potential barriers to uptake of research results in-country. Choose people to consult who are likely to know what will and will not work and back your choices with appropriate justification for your choice.
- If you have them, demonstrate that you have strong existing in-country partnerships with relevant named teams/individuals in organisations that have a track record of delivering. If the partnerships are new, explain clearly how they came about and why you selected these partners and how you will build the relationship.

## **The Research**

- When research is the major activity in the applications, this should be of the usual high quality expected by the Research Councils. This includes clear explanation of the proposed research, experience in the area, preliminary data and a well thought through and high quality proposal. When applications are multidisciplinary, all the components should be of a sufficient research quality and not just the main discipline.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the societal and cultural context of the research and its likely impacts on the ODA eligible country in question, and how this understanding will be addressed by the project, potentially including, where appropriate, research contributions from the arts and humanities and social science researchers, and/or local expertise, to ensure appropriate pathways to impact.
- Be realistic about the outcomes/ impact of the research and the specific research target you are focussing on; it is unlikely one application will solve global hunger. Many applications also overstate the impact of solving their particular research question on the system they were studying. A compelling proposal is one in which applicants are realistic about their research, identify clear, quantifiable benefits, demonstrate good in-country knowledge, and have thought about the impact of their research.
- If you are building capacity in the UK or overseas, explain what the benefits will be beyond the lifetime of the grant and how these will be maintained, and sustained in future.
- Where possible, build on existing work in the country/region and add value to global research efforts by international agencies and consortia. Applications that demonstrate awareness of existing efforts and make active attempts to link in with these will potentially demonstrate more added value and impact. There have been many efforts to address ODA challenges for a number of years; many applications fall short when they

show no appreciation of previous global or local activities in the area.

- Do preparatory work that shows you understand the issues in-country already, understand the local problems and potential constraints and demonstrate that the proposed work is practical and feasible in that context.
- Some applications can be overambitious in terms of stated research outputs that they plan to achieve in the timescales and with the requested resources. The need to build the relationships with overseas partners and the complexity of multidisciplinary and multi-partner projects is not always factored in. Timelines and Gantt charts which factor in partnership building can give more confidence in the feasibility of the proposal.
- There can be potential naivety about how long certain activities take in ODA countries, and assumptions that timelines can be extrapolated from UK experience. Regulatory or local permissions, experimental set up time, legal frameworks etc. can all cause delays to projects and affect timelines; you need to be aware of these and describe how you propose to manage the risks, where possible. Even if there are no regulatory hurdles ensure you articulate that you have checked, and with whom.
- Preliminary data help to derisk elements of research proposals. It is important to consider if you are translating your UK research knowledge to a different location (with different environment, culture and societal drivers), or bringing research techniques to bear on an ODA problem, your track record of addressing this problem in a UK context may not be convincing enough. Even a small amount of preliminary data or other evidence demonstrating the proposed research is feasible in-country will be beneficial. Assuming it will work potentially demonstrates a lack of knowledge of the in-country issues.
- As for all applications, the Justification of Resources is an important document that will assist assessors in making informed judgements about whether the resources requested are appropriate for the proposed project. The justification should be appropriate to the scale and complexity of the project
- It is clearly appropriate to have necessary travel to build these partnerships, but be clear to justify the frequency, why you can't have virtual meetings and who needs to travel. If you are building links and exchanging techniques it may be more appropriate to send the people with the technical expertise and not just the PIs and, where appropriate, provide opportunities for colleagues from ODA countries to train in UK labs or present findings in international conferences.
- Speak to people with experience of writing ODA proposals and working overseas in an ODA context. There have been numerous Research Council activities with DFID, the Newton Fund and work funded by overseas funders such as Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Use this knowledge of how they developed the partnerships, issues they had in experimental design and how to derisk them, and how they ensured an effective pathway to impact, in-country.