

# International Development Select Committee inquiry on the future of UK aid

1. The British Academy, the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences, welcomes the opportunity to respond to the select committee's inquiry on the future of UK aid. The Academy delivers a series of research programmes funded through Official Development Assistance (ODA) supported by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) such as through the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF).
2. Research and innovation has been a key element of the UK Government's approach to ODA funding including in the 2015 UK Aid Strategy, providing robust research for development impact on the most pressing global development challenges. The cuts to this funding are having a devastating impact on the immensely valuable research that funds such as the GCRF and the Newton Fund have supported in recent years.
3. In December 2020 the four Presidents of the UK National Academies wrote to the First Secretary of State and Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs to reiterate the importance and value of funding for research and innovation through the UK's ODA budget, and to express concern at the reduction in funding.<sup>1</sup> This concern remains.
4. The Government has outlined its priorities for ODA investment to tackle climate change, protect biodiversity, promote international health security, prioritise girls' education, and increase UK partnerships in science research and technology to help resolve conflicts, alleviating humanitarian crises, defending open societies and promoting trade and investment. The British Academy supports the ambition to address these areas and welcomes the inclusion of partnerships in research and innovation as a key facet of the approach. Research is critical also to progressing all of these challenges and for the meeting of the Sustainable Development Goals more broadly.
5. Many existing research programmes across a range of Government departments are already supporting the above objectives. ODA research funded by all four of the UK's National Academies is addressing all of the above priorities, as is humanities and social sciences research funded by the British Academy specifically. For example, British Academy GCRF awards:

---

<sup>1</sup><https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/3244/December-2020-Letter-to-Foreign-Secretary-Presidents-National-Academies.pdf>

- a. have developed the most comprehensive open access global database on climate laws and policies;
  - b. are examining how a nuanced understanding of the relationship between cultural heritage and biodiversity affects sustainable development in the Global South;
  - c. have helped to safeguard potable water provision in urban informal communities in Tanzania and Bangladesh;
  - d. have assessed the impacts of the Quality Preschool for Ghana programme, which aimed to enhance the quality of kindergarten education – the research team found that the programme did indeed improve children’s academic and social development outcomes;
  - e. have developed a new modelling tool to maximise the benefit of flood prevention investments in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam;
  - f. have demonstrated that Jordanian concerns about the impact of the influx of Syrian refugees on local labour markets are largely misplaced, with Jordanians living in areas with a high concentration of refugees having no worse labour market outcomes than Jordanians with less exposure to the refugee influx; and
  - g. have enhanced the seismic safety of Kathmandu’s historic urban infrastructure by recourse to traditional rather than modern techniques and materials, thus preserving the monuments’ intangible value and providing benefits to the everyday lives of residents whose livelihoods depend on local tourism.
6. These contributions show the impact and value research supported by ODA funding has working with local communities to engage on and implement significant change. The loss of such opportunities is having the greatest impact on those locally at a time when the engagement and support this research is delivering is most needed.
  7. The contributions also illustrate the critical role of research and innovation in the humanities and social sciences in supporting the ambitions of the Integrated Review and the need to ensure that such activities continue to be funded under the UK’s ODA budget. In addition, they demonstrate the success and effectiveness of funds such as the GCRF and its operation led by BEIS should continue as a priority.
  8. The British Academy is extremely concerned that the reduction in funding for research and innovation, even if ultimately temporary, has compromised the ability of the UK to act as a leader in addressing global challenges and building capacity in research talent, particularly at a time when COVID-19 has demonstrated the critical need for global collaboration. There is an enormous sense of loss within the research community, not only for the research programmes which have had to be significantly scaled back or terminated prematurely, but for those that now will not begin their vital research to address key global development challenges. The 10-year vision of the Integrated Review should be matched by a similar long-term ODA funding commitment, including for research and innovation.
  9. It is also apparent that the cuts are posing very real challenges to researchers’ livelihoods, with contracts being terminated at short notice. Early career researchers in the UK and those reliant on the salaries of research positions funded by these programmes in partner countries have been particularly adversely affected. Furthermore, the continued uncertainty around budget allocations beyond the current financial year means that there is a considerable risk of compromising the impact of the important ODA research and innovation programmes that have been funded and of causing serious and lasting damage to relationships and reputation forged over many years that will, in turn, take many more years to rebuild.

10. This ongoing uncertainty and the cuts to ODA research are not consistent with the ambitions the Government announced in the Integrated Review for the UK to be a research and innovation superpower. The reductions we have seen in the levels of the UK's ODA budget for research and innovation activity are directly harming the UK's ability to maintain such a global position.
11. We wish to note to the Committee the Academy's dismay at the scale of the reductions to ODA research and innovation. In summary, it is having a devastating impact on the immensely valuable research that funds such as GCRF have supported in recent years. It will affect the improvement that such funding has spearheaded in our research culture and equity, as well as posing very real challenges to researchers' livelihoods and to the UK's international reputation. It is critical that ODA research and innovation funding should be reinstated to ensure that the exceptional potential it has to deliver change, is realised, and that it is provided with the long-term commitment and security to meet the Government's ambitions to become a research and innovation superpower.

For further information on this response, please contact Philip Lewis at [p.lewis@thebritishacademy.ac.uk](mailto:p.lewis@thebritishacademy.ac.uk)