

**view from the top** ray kent

# Charge of empire building is unfair to global challenge hubs

The announcement that UK Research and Innovation is to invest more than £200 million in a programme to build partnerships in research with low and middle-income countries was never going to pass unnoticed, especially in the febrile atmosphere of Brexit. Hence, a relatively low-key government press release on 10 December 2018 describing 12 UKRI Global Research Hubs funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) was met with criticism from some quarters.

Even the normally measured James Wilsdon, a professor of research policy at the University of Sheffield, was reported by the BBC as saying that UKRI should be focusing on the challenges of leaving the European Union, rather than “throwing its PR weight behind potentially unhelpful ‘Empire 2.0’ narratives about the future of the UK’s collaboration with the rest of the world”.

Such remarks are based partly on a worry that following Brexit, the hubs—funded at between £12m to £19m each—will divert a substantial amount of money away from blue-sky research. They also echo a concern expressed when the £1.5-billion GCRF was launched in 2016.

At the time, for example, geographer Clive Barnett of the University of Exeter described the then-chancellor George Osborne’s creation of the GCRF as “either a very clever and quite open accounting scam, or...a rather wonderful example of having your cake and eating it—an austerity-shaped cake with ODA [Official Development Assistance]-shaped sprinkles”.

**WHATEVER THE MOTIVES** behind the GCRF, portraying the hubs as the evil twin of the Newton Fund—another partnership-building initiative, as yet untarnished by accusations of neo-imperialism—or even as a poor substitute for participation in Horizon Europe, the next European Union Framework programme, seems unduly harsh.

That is not to say that this huge investment by UKRI is without risk. The freshly minted hubs are intended to address as-yet intractable development challenges that cut across a number of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is no easy target for UK scientists and their overseas collaborators. Yet the vision is surely laudable.

“There are 155 million stunted children globally. Supporting these children and preventing further suffering is an act of humanity, not an act of empire,” says Claire Heffernan, director of the London International Development Centre and lead for the GCRF Action Against Stunting Hub,

one of two based at the Royal Veterinary College (RVC). “The UK leaving the EU does not abrogate our collective responsibility to change the outcomes for these children or find solutions to any of the other global challenges we face.”

Aside from the major scientific challenges that will be addressed—ranging from conflict and gender-based violence, through to disaster risk management—the GCRF hubs aim to strengthen the capability and capacity for research, innovation and knowledge exchange in partner countries.

This is the aspect perhaps least understood by critics who think the UK is behaving paternalistically towards the global south. UKRI believes that providing funding for five years will allow the hubs to build firm foundations and create long-term partnerships. If it is right, what’s not to like?

Talk to the hub coordinators, and it soon becomes obvious that any notion of engaging in a new colonialism was far from their minds when preparing the funding proposals. Rather, each hub is committed to creating a partnership of equals, without being naive as to the practical challenges of working with what might be 20 to 30 institutions spread across different countries, cultures, languages and time zones. UK researchers are acutely aware of both the challenges ahead and of the potential to help realise the SDGs.

To succeed, each partnership will require fresh thinking, challenging assumptions on both sides. “If the hubs are to build equitable, mutually beneficial and sustainable partnerships, there is a need for UK institutions to develop their awareness and appreciation of the differences in organisational structures and cultures they will encounter,” says Fiona Tomley, professor of experimental parasitology at the RVC and lead investigator for the GCRF One Health Poultry Hub.

My experience of the hubs and the researchers who will work in them has shown their commitment to achieving real change. They stand to benefit both disadvantaged communities and advance the UK’s aim to be a leading nation in development research. As the hubs find their voice in the post-Brexit era, we can expect them to have an impact that is positive and long-lasting. If that is Empire 2.0, then bring it on.

*More to say? Email [news@researchresearch.com](mailto:news@researchresearch.com)*

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