

British Academy Cities & Infrastructure Review Report

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With

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The Cities & Infrastructure programme, supported by the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) funded by the UK Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), was developed to address critical challenges in developing countries through promotion of cutting-edge research and innovation. In particular, this programme has promoted collaborative research in order to tackle the inevitably complex and multi-dimensional nature of major development challenges. As a result, the seventeen ODA-compliant projects in the programme's portfolio were: interdisciplinary; led by researchers in fourteen UK institutions; and underpinned by collaborations with partners (academics and non-academic stakeholders) in twenty countries around the world. Projects were funded with up to £300K and lasted for up to 16 months between 2017 and 2019, although some finished, by agreement, in early 2020.

Approach and Methods

Based on stage-appropriate objectives for the recently-finished programme, a *Framework of Core Questions* was developed to guide the review. This review has 'triangulated' across multiple perspectives (PIs, Co-Is/project partners in the UK and LMICs, individuals with overview perspectives) and across multiple methods: a) document analysis; b) semi-structured interviews (twenty diverse individuals including four individuals with overview perspectives, ten UK-based researchers and six Co-Is/project partners from LMICs); and c) an on-line survey of researchers (42 individuals respondents, of whom a third were PIs and a fifth were from LMICs).

Overview of Success

A key factor in the undoubted success of this programme was the consistent clarity of the British Academy's vision for the programme through: framing the call for proposals; selecting proposals; working constructively and flexibly with the projects; and adding programme-wide value. Throughout, emphasis has been placed on the importance of: *genuine* interdisciplinarity; *genuine* orientation toward actual impact on LMICs; and *genuine* partnerships. Led by researchers in the humanities and social sciences, a distinctive feature of the programme has been the focus on individual human beings and their communities.

Ultimately, development of new understanding and contributions toward change derive from extraordinary efforts by dedicated interdisciplinary/international/inter-sectoral teams tackling some of the toughest long-term challenges posed in LMICs.

Impacts

Projects funded through the British Academy's Cities & Infrastructure programme have made significant contributions toward SDG-relevant impacts in LMICs. It has already been possible to capture an impressive number of impacts and/or impacts-in-progress, despite the recent start date (2017), short duration (~18 months) and relatively modest funding scale (~ £300K) of the projects, demonstrating excellent value for money. Gathered from each of the seventeen projects, nearly fifty impacts have been identified in this review, with some entries actually composed of multiple additional impacts; inevitably even this list is not comprehensive.

Interdisciplinarity

The key strength of the programme has been its emphasis on interdisciplinarity. Project teams were not simply composed of multiple disciplines, there were active efforts by teams to build interdisciplinary synergies among members in order to address wicked problems. The Academy's expectation that the humanities and social sciences would take the lead in partnerships was also appreciated as a positive differentiation from many other 'interdisciplinary' programmes, often led by natural sciences with only token inclusion of

these areas. Given that SDGs are inevitably goals that involve human beings, the Academy's purview was noted as particularly important for GCRF initiatives, showing the value of humanities and social science research to provide helpful solutions to people's lives. There is scope for spreading this emphasis further, within GCRF and other initiatives.

Commitment to stakeholder engagement, relevance, potential for impact

Another key strength that emerged was the programme's requirement that projects be relevant and oriented toward impact; this critical component of programme design was underpinned by the explicit expectation that stakeholders would be engaged and/or reached in some meaningful way. The aim was for projects to produce change in the form of positive interventions by giving policymakers and practitioners evidence and insight. The projects selected were clearly committed to research relevant to wicked problems and made the effort to live up to expectations of stakeholder involvement. These efforts have borne fruit in the many impacts (at various stages of development) generated by the projects.

Partnerships and capacity-building

Another strength of the programme has been the way that it fostered genuine partnerships between UK and LMIC researchers. Two-way learning took place and many partners have continued to work together.

Capacity-building as a programme objective was achieved in various ways. In some cases, LMIC researchers expanded their approaches to research to become more interdisciplinary, challenge-led and/or interactive with stakeholders. Sometimes it took the form of stakeholders themselves learning to do something new, using data or data-gathering techniques. Careers were developed in both the UK and LMICs.

Other programme strengths

In terms of design, the way in which the programme was framed can be viewed as a key strength, in its consistent emphasis on interdisciplinarity, partnerships and orientation toward wicked problems in the Global South. Furthermore, while being 'challenge-led', it was at the same time 'bottom-up'. The definition of projects was deliberately left to researchers, so that the programme benefited from their insights and passion regarding priority problems.

Strengths were also manifested in the delivery of the programme. Programme-wide events helped to highlight synergies and stimulate lively discussions and insights across projects. The Academy's flexible and supportive, rather than bureaucratic, role was much appreciated by researchers. Furthermore, the facilitative role played by the programme director was clearly seen as aiding effective synergies in implementation.

Issues

Very few programme-level issues were raised by informants as they were primarily appreciative of the opportunity to do meaningful research. However, most researchers would have welcomed a longer duration for their project, to allow not only more research (in a context often calling for flexibility) but also more follow-up with stakeholders toward impacts and/or scalability. A related issue is the general scarcity of opportunities for follow-up funding to support interdisciplinary teams, perhaps particularly those led by humanities and social sciences. The rapid turnaround for preparing proposals was noted as problematic for those trying to develop effective partnerships, with some suggesting a mechanism of seed money to ensure LMIC perspectives are fully embedded in proposal development. Academy staff are aware of both these issues and have been flexible whenever possible and have built longer duration into the subsequent Urban Infrastructures of Well-Being programme, which has provided welcome follow-on support for some project researchers.