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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Doing harm: the impact of UK's GCRF cuts on research ethics, partnerships and governance

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In spring 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, research projects funded by the UK's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) were subjected to budget cuts. The cuts were the result of UK government's decision to reduce its Official Development Assistance (ODA), which had devastating effects for humanitarian, development and research work. This article draws on focus group discussions with project teams working on three large GCRF-funded projects to explore the effects of these cuts. The article documents how the cuts curtailed project aspirations and impact, had a negative toll on the mental health of researchers, and imperilled the trusting relationships upon which international research collaborations are built. The article argues that the cuts expose the shallow commitments to research ethics and equitable partnerships of powerful actors in the UK research ecosystem, including research councils and government. In 'doing harm' via these cuts, the article explores the failure of research governance structures and the continued coloniality underpinning the UK's approach to researching 'global challenges'.

Key words GCRF budget cuts • research ethics • research governance • partnership • coloniality

Key messages

- The ODA budget cuts caused extensive harms to researchers and partners leading to reduced impacts.
- The GCRF case exposed inadequate research ethics and governance procedures.
- The cuts highlighted the shallow UK institutional commitments to equitable South–North partnerships and continued coloniality.
- Political intrusion and contractual violations led to a distrust of the UK government.

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Introduction

In spring 2021 – amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which was having its own dramatic effects on international research projects – UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) leaked news that the government's decision to reduce its ODA budget would lead to cuts in ongoing ODA-funded research. As news was shared on Twitter, confused researchers realised they were 'GCRF'd' (Pablo K, 2021). This article explores the impact of the 2021 cuts on three major research projects funded through the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), a major UK initiative to address pressing and complex issues in 'the developing world' via research international research collaboration (GCRF, 2017: 1). The article highlights the effects of the cuts on project outcomes, team members' mental health and the relationships that underpin international research partnerships. The article also considers the wider implications of these cuts for research governance, research ethics and international collaborative research, arguing that the cuts are a profound illustration of the inequities and hypocrisies that underpin the UK research economy and highlighting its enduring coloniality.

We report on the findings of focus groups conducted by the lead author in the months immediately following UKRI's announcement with teams working on three GCRF-funded projects. In dialogue with literature around coloniality and the effects of neoliberalism in the production of knowledge, the development of international research partnerships and the governance of research, we outline the ways in which these cuts have done harm. It is unsurprising, of course, that cutting the budgets of ongoing research projects will 'do harm', but its documentation is important for several reasons. First, the principle of 'do no harm' underpins the research endeavour via its ethical, governance and regulatory commitments and processes. The harms caused to the researchers – material, psychological and relational – and to the knowledge generated via research warrants testimony, particularly in the case of publicly-funded ODA research, which has been designed for significant societal impact. Second, we show how these harms extend to the prospects for equitable research partnerships and collaborations. Despite research regulators' espoused commitments to equity, diversity and inclusion, and ethical research governance (and the requirement that research projects uphold these principles), this case demonstrates the ease with which national authorities can breach these commitments without consequence. In addition

to documenting the impact of the funding cuts, this paper contributes to efforts to hold the UK government and research councils accountable to their commitments and for their actions.

(Cutting) the Global Challenges Research Fund

The GCRF, established in 2015, is administered by the UK Academies, The UK Space Agency and UKRI's various funding councils. The fund's £1.5 billion budget is drawn from the UK government's ODA Research and Innovation commitment. While the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) is by far the largest department in receipt of ODA, other departments also receive ODA budgets. GCRF is administered by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS). GCRF was established to address 'the most significant and complex problems faced by the developing world' (GCRF 2017: 1) and to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The GCRF seeks to 'maximize the impact of research and innovation to improve lives and opportunity in the developing world' via research partnerships between UK researchers and researchers based in countries on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) list (UKRI, 2021a). GCRF is lauded, by some, for moving away from extractive and 'parachute' research relationships between the UK and the Global South (Bockarie et al, 2018) towards a model of co-creation and equitable partnership. Others critique it as form of 'tied aid' that intentionally blurs the aid landscape and disproportionately benefits (and retains funds in) the UK (ICAI, 2019a; 2019b).

In November 2020, the UK government announced that it would cut ODA spending from 0.7 per cent of gross national income (GNI) to 0.5 per cent. Until this point the UK had been one of the few high-income countries to meet the United Nations' 0.7 per cent target for ODA,¹ reaching it for the first time in 2013 and under statutory duty to meet it since 2015 (Loft and Brien, 2021). The decision to cut ODA funding was taken as part of a spending review ahead of the 2021/22 financial year. The spending review was justified as necessary given the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hansard HC Deb, 2021). The move to 0.5 per cent, combined with the already lower than expected GNI due to COVID-19, reduced UK aid by £4.5 billion.

We recognise that the harm caused by the cuts was most significantly felt outside the research arena, with immediate effects for FCDO humanitarian and international development efforts. Devastating cuts included a 60 per cent reduction in UK aid to Yemen, where one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world continues, and the full-scale cancellation of many projects (Worley, 2021). Syria funding was reduced by 69 per cent, while funding to Bangladesh and South Sudan were reduced by 62 per cent and 49 per cent respectively (NAO, 2022). Funding to the UN Population Fund was cut and support for Palestinian refugees in Syria was withdrawn despite warnings regarding the impact on health and education. International development and humanitarian organisations in the UK, along with MPs and members of the public objected vociferously to the cuts, including by questioning the economic rationale behind them. Former International Development Secretary and Conservative MP, Andrew Mitchell, said 'This dreadful political – not economic – decision shames our country and our Government. It should shame us all' (Hansard HC Deb, 2021).

He led an attempt to restore the target, which failed in June 2021, and in July 2021 MPs voted in favour of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's plan to restore ODA to 0.7 per cent only when a series of fiscal tests are met (Loft and Brien, 2021). By the government's own calculations, the soonest these tests might be fulfilled is in 2024 and other commentators suggest a far longer timeframe (Worley, 2021). A 2022 audit of the cuts states that the British government pushed through the aid cuts with little time to identify the risks and impact they would have on vulnerable populations (NAO, 2022).

In the research sector, the announcement of the ODA research cuts led to uncertainties about the future of GCRF and other ODA-funded initiatives such as the Newton Fund. Yet, many researchers did not appreciate the immediate implications of the cuts given that UKRI (and its predecessors) did not tend to renege upon existing contracted research projects. Grant holders were shocked when in March 2021 a statement from UKRI was leaked to *Research Professional*, announcing that UKRI's ODA budget allocation for 2021/22 had been reduced by nearly half, leaving a £120 million gap. BEIS's reduced ODA allocation left it unable to meet its contractual commitments for 2021/22. The department consequently revoked previously committed UKRI funding. The UKRI communication to grant holders stated that the situation made it 'unavoidable that some grants will need to be terminated'. The UKRI asked university leaders to 'reprofile' all ODA-funded projects based at their institutions, either finding ways for grants to cut their budgets significantly for the 2021/22 financial year or marking grants for termination at the end of July 2021. Where projects were not terminated, the principal investigators were tasked with cutting their project's budget. Universities submitted the reprofiled projects to UKRI in April 2021, and over the following months UKRI responded with approvals or queries. The three GCRF-funded projects examined in this article were all reprofiled with significant budget cuts as part of this process.

Coloniality and historical in/equities in international research collaborations

In many respects GCRF marked a positive shift away from some of the well-documented historical challenges in South–North research partnerships (Court, 2004; Ishengoma, 2016; Bradley, 2017; Rethinking Research Collaborative, 2018; Grieve and Mitchell, 2020; Asare et al, 2022). Typically, these partnerships are funded by Northern agencies that establish the eligibility criteria in terms of disciplinary or research focus and stipulate the modalities of partnership (Shuayb and Brun, 2021; Shanks and Paulson, 2022). Such research tends to be applied and is often interdisciplinary in nature and focuses on problems physically located in the Global South (Crossley and Holmes, 2001; Bradley, 2017; Tabulawa, 2017). Funded partnerships often include an explicit 'capacity building' element which regularly reflects a deficit view of Southern capacities and an inflated sense of Northern knowledge and expertise (Koch, 2020; Walker and Martinez-Vargas, 2020; Axelby et al, 2022). Within international research teams there is a tendency for Northern researchers to take the lead in establishing research agendas and assuming intellectual leadership of projects in ways that position Southern researchers as data collectors or junior partners within studies wholly designed in the North (Grieve and Mitchell, 2020; Mkwanzani and Cin, 2021; Shanks and Paulson, 2022). For example, in the

field of education a recent study that focused on the equity of collaborative research projects involving African-based researchers found that half of the projects initiated by Northern researchers positioned African partners as implementers of Northern projects rather than genuine collaborators, even in the case of senior academics (Asare et al, 2022). These inequities in research partnerships are indicative of what Bhambra (2014) describes as the coloniality of knowledge production, operating via systems that are extractive, drawing data and other knowledge resources from the Global South for processing, polishing and presenting in the Global North (Shuayb and Brun, 2021).

In calling for ‘meaningful and equitable relationships’, GCRF funding criteria (GCRF, 2017) intentionally responded to some of these issues – for example, by requiring Southern partners to play a leading role in problem identification and calling for mutuality in learning and capacity development (Grieve and Mitchell, 2020; Mitchell et al, 2020). Yet many GCRF research calls required principal investigators to be UK-based, creating project power dynamics that could undermine truly equitable partnerships. During its short lifespan, GCRF gradually increased the number of calls that allowed researchers in OECD–DAC countries to lead applications. Yet a change in organisational culture takes time and success in this endeavour was limited. UK researchers and professional service staff involved in GCRF-funded projects have also worked internally within their universities to redress internal practices that undermine partnerships, including exclusionary due diligence practices (Axelby et al, 2022), contracting and payment processes that regularly undermine respectful partnerships through delays, rudeness, negative assumptions around the capacity of partner organisations and the risks involved in working with them, and internal systems that are not fit for purpose (Mkwanzani and Cin, 2021; Axelby et al, 2022; Shanks and Paulson, 2022; Brown et al, forthcoming).

The changing landscape of research governance in the UK: standardising and individualising risk

The dysfunctional internal systems referred to in the preceding section result from a wider landscape of neoliberal research governance in UK universities that is increasingly standardised and oriented towards documenting compliance with protocols and avoiding legal risk (Roberts and Peters, 2008; Brin Hyatt et al, 2015). It is the case that many aspects of research governance and regulation – ethics boards, safeguarding requirements, risk assessments, advisory boards and steering committees – have developed in response to historical cases of malpractice in fields such as medicine and psychology (Busher and Fox, 2019). Over the last two decades, the processes and protocols developed to protect people in these more invasive areas of research have increasingly been applied indiscriminately to social research in ways that overstate the potential for harm to result from such work (Busher and Fox, 2019), and that can obscure ethical issues that merit further attention and reflection (Oyinloye, 2021; Shanks and Paulson, 2022). Alongside increasing standardisation of research ethics in UK universities, the same period has seen international research projects subjected to burgeoning financial regulations, with the rise of ‘due diligence’ assessments as part of the counterterrorism architecture (Muhomed et al, 2021).

Critical studies of regulation have noted the delegation of responsibilities away from the state and towards the higher education sector, the institution and the

individual researcher (McDermont et al, 2020). These trends are visible in research governance, whereby research councils, universities, research projects and individual researchers must develop systems to mitigate (and arguably offload) risk (Brown et al, forthcoming), assure ethics, and safeguard researchers and research participants from harm. The principle of ‘do no harm’ is enshrined in research ethics (including in procedural understandings of ethics and more holistic and reflexive understandings (Stutchbury and Fox, 2009)) and is espoused across research governance structures from council, to university, to the reflexive team-based discussions of the three projects that are the empirical focus on this article. Increasingly, research councils offer their own guidance on navigating the ethics of international research, including attention not just to data collection and dissemination, but also to ethical and equitable project design and partnership, extending the principle of do no harm across all aspects of a research project (Wright, 2020; UKRI and UNICEF, 2021). However, as we will develop in this article, the UK government eschewed the injunction to do no harm in its decision to cut its aid budget, as did UKRI in its implementation of the cuts, with a range of implications for the research ecosystem (Imperiale and Phipps, 2022).

Methods

In this study we sought to understand the effects of the GCRF cuts from the perspectives of those involved in three large ongoing projects (see Table 1), including academic researchers, project managers and civil society partners. All three projects have large teams, which include UK-based principal investigators and co-investigators

Table 1: GCRF-funded projects included in this study

Project name	Funder	Countries	Focus
Education, Justice and Memory Network (EdJAM)	GCRF/AHR £2 million	Research team in Cambodia Colombia Pakistan Uganda UK with projects in 13 countries	EdJAM supports creative approaches to teaching and learning about the violent past to build more just futures. It commissions research in this area and has recently expanded its work to a total of 13 countries. For more information, visit: https://edjam.network
Education as and for Epistemic, Environmental and Transitional Justice to Enable Sustainable Development (JustEd)	GCRF/ESRC £1.4 million	Nepal Peru Uganda UK	JustEd explores the complex trajectories across policy, curriculum, learner experiences and future actions in relation to environmental justice, epistemic justice and transitional justice. It explores how these trajectories contribute to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals. For more information, visit: https://www.bath.ac.uk/projects/justed/
Transforming Education for Sustainable Futures (TESF)	GCRF/ESRC £4.7 million	India Netherlands Rwanda Somalia/Somaliland South Africa UK	TESF is supporting research and action for socially and environmentally sustainable futures through 65 projects conducted through multistakeholder partnerships led by researchers in India, Rwanda, Somalia/Somaliland and South Africa. For more information, visit: https://tesf.network

based in OECD–DAC country universities and research institutes and in the UK. The three projects employ project management colleagues and postdoctoral researchers internationally and in the UK. EdJAM also works in partnership with civil society organisations in several countries, including the UK.

Data collection took place in May and June 2021 and was led by the first author, an independent researcher who had previously worked with TEF. The other authors are linked to the three projects, except for one who was UKRI's GCRF Challenge Lead for education. As an author team, we share findings from the data gathered from interviews and focus groups with participants from the project teams and reflect on our own experiences navigating the cuts.

At the point of data collection, all projects had submitted their reprofiled budgets to UKRI and were awaiting the outcome. Data were collected via four regionally organised focus groups conducted through Zoom, and via a self-completed questionnaire emailed to those unable to participate in the focus group discussions. Both methods were conducted simultaneously, asked the same open-ended questions and the data from both methods were combined for analysis. The questions included when and how the participants found out about the cuts, what their initial reaction was, how the news affected collaborations and research infrastructure in the UK and other project countries, and the likely impact of the cuts to the projects.

All principal and co-investigators in the UK and overseas, postdoctoral fellows, research managers and leaders of civil society partner organisations involved in the three projects at that time were invited to participate. This group of potential participants included 48 people, of whom 29 participated in the study, with 25 attending focus group discussions and four people sharing written accounts of their experiences via questionnaires. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Bristol and participants consented to share their views as semi-anonymised quotes, which include their geographical locations and research roles (delinked from projects). Participants accepted the risk that readers familiar with these projects may be able to make an educated guess about the attribution of particular quotes, which – along with the potential reputational damage to projects themselves – may have tempered their comments. They were also aware that their accounts would be seen by a wider team involved in analysis and authorship, which included colleagues on GCRF projects, and for this reason only the lead author, as an independent researcher, handled non-anonymised data.

Data were analysed inductively by three members of the authorship team, who coded transcripts and grouped emerging themes which were then discussed by the whole team. Through this process, it became clear that participants were not only concerned by the harm to projects, colleagues and relationships, but also wider aspects of the research ecosystem, such as tensions and contradictions within the GCRF partnership model and trends in research governance, as we discuss next.

Findings and discussion

The budget cuts and their effects provoke fundamental questions about whether equitable research partnerships are possible within the current systems of research governance in the UK. As already discussed, a stated objective of the GCRF is to address inequities in Global North–Global South research partnerships. However,

as we will detail, the budget cuts illustrated how such partnerships not only remain inequitable, but also showed how the key actors developing and maintaining research partnerships – the investigators (in the UK and the Global South) had limited control over decisions that would effectively diminish and derail their projects. Furthermore, the cuts illustrated how governance processes involving research councils and universities that are intended to ensure research integrity, can be ignored and superseded by government actors. In this section we examine the impact of the budget cuts, including how they (1) disrupted projects and diminished their social impact; (2) caused a considerable emotional toll; and (3) highlighted the failure of UK ethics and accountability processes, with wider implications for the landscape of research governance.

Project disruption and decline in project aspirations

Unsurprisingly when budgets are cut, the potential achievements of research projects are diminished. However, principal investigators, co-investigators, researchers and other partners were tasked with ‘reprofiling’ their studies: that is, achieving the same (or near enough) objectives with substantially reduced financial resources. Significantly, UKRI did not consider the time and effort involved in reconfiguring the projects and project budgets. Planning and budgeting for large-scale research studies are time- and resource-intensive processes. Major budget cuts during project cycles incur similarly demanding planning processes.

A project partner in Nepal described the extent of the conversation and debate as the research team negotiated how to implement cuts while trying to preserve the integrity of the project. They considered the possibility of maintaining the project’s duration despite the cuts, before ultimately deciding their best option was to reduce the length of the study. They were faced with serious questions about whether they could effectively answer the research questions with reduced time and other resources. They prioritised maintaining the depth of the intervention, to ensure rigour in the research, by keeping the same level of engagement at each research site, while reducing the overall sample size. They cut transcription and translation budgets, accepting that they would have to choose which data to make accessible across all research teams (who do not share a single language), which meant compromising the comparative aspects of the study. They were painfully aware of what they were losing in terms of the accessibility, impact and significance of their research. ‘Reprofiling’ the study was difficult and the reduction in sample size and data would affect the claims each study could make, thereby limiting the influence on policy. Cutting the length of a project reduces the opportunities to share findings with policy makers, as a colleague in Uganda observed:

‘The output in terms of policy, we shall not be contributing greatly, and to some extent objectively, to what would be advising our government here.’
(Co-investigator, Uganda)

A colleague in Uganda summarised the effect of the cuts on project impact succinctly, explaining that in securing such a large project, he had initially felt like ‘now we’re thinking big’ and with the cuts, he was forced to ‘think small’. In Colombia, a project partner working on education about transitional justice also highlighted the extent of how these cuts would impact the work done in schools:

‘Any cut ... is absolutely significant for us ... 44,000 sterling pounds are not much in terms of what happens in England, but is everything in terms of what happens here ... the truth is that 1, 2, 3, 4 schools less that we attend is 400, 600, 1,000 students that won’t ever have the opportunity.’ (Civil society partner, Colombia)

As interviewees described, applying budget cuts to large, multi-partner studies involved reconfiguring plans and budgets in accordance with new figures and/or timelines, reallocating resources that had been reserved for specific activities, and renegotiating relationships and partnerships. These conversations were undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic and were stressful and distressing, as discussed in the next section. Interviewees described how it was unrealistic and unreasonable to expect these projects to deliver a similar impact with dramatically less funding, and argued that funders should have taken into account the time and resource that was required to reconfigure projects midway through. An investigator in Uganda explained how the overall impact of the project across the country would be curtailed with the reduction in the size of the budget available to support local research, highlighting how the task of managing deflated expectations would fall to him and his colleagues although they had no control over the decisions that had led to this outcome:

‘The engagement that ... we’d planned for June ... the budget cuts ... affected it, so we may probably look into July ... [it’s] all been messed up ... We already told [researchers and civil society organisations] about the funding under the small grant as well as the large grant [commissions] so they are aware that we had about £15,000 to £30,000 [for project budgets that we could fund] ... So that is something that we now need to manage ... researchers and also civil society organisations will be disappointed but that is what we need to manage.’ (Civil society partner, Uganda)

Lowering aspirations is particularly harmful for impact-oriented research projects such as those funded by the GCRF, which aspire towards social and environmental improvements. Crucially, it is not just advances in scientific or disciplinary knowledge that is lost due to budget cuts, but also positive impacts on human lives and policy. A civil society partner in Colombia explained that, in their case, the budget cuts and the delays associated with waiting to know the outcome of reprofiling would be felt most strongly by the schools, teachers and students with whom they were working:

‘You end up putting the burden on those that are the least strong ... you will end up cutting little things that were making a lot of difference’ (Civil society partner, Colombia)

While all involved expressed the burden they felt by the budget cuts – the ‘reprofiling’ – this partner summarised how partners with the least resources experienced the deepest impact and emotional harm, as they lacked institutional nets and sponges that would allow others to absorb some impact and maintain more control over the consequences for more vulnerable participants and partners.

Emotional impact

The budget cuts imposed a pervasive and powerful emotional toll on people working on the projects. Recall that all participants were already dealing with the stress, uncertainty and emotion associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and many had experienced serious ill health themselves or among close family members. As a researcher in Pakistan explained,

‘Uncertainty is constant, right? ... between the pandemic and the cuts themselves ... it would help if they would just be clear on what we have ... this is adding to the uncertainty and anxiety.’ (Co-investigator, Pakistan)

For some colleagues whose jobs were directly funded by GCRF projects, there was extreme uncertainty and anxiety as the positions that they had believed secure for the duration of the projects were suddenly in jeopardy. Though there were ultimately no cuts to project-funded jobs on the three projects included in this study, the emotional toll of the associated stress and uncertainty around the future of their roles, and therefore their incomes, was significant, as was the limbo period through which contracted staff faced uncertainty about their roles. The duty of care that funders should have for the people in positions that they fund directly was abandoned and the responsibility for the future of their positions was transferred to the reprofiling process. This also added additional stress for principal investigators navigating budget cuts with an awareness of how people’s livelihoods and well-being would be affected by the outcomes.

When describing their responses to the GCRF cuts, participants spoke of *anger, frustration, confusion, shock, exhaustion, disillusionment, helplessness, grief, guilt, disappointment, disbelief, stress, anxiety, suspense, uncertainty, resentment, embarrassment, being overwhelmed* and *feeling stranded*. These emotions were associated with the unexpected and sudden difficulty of managing the cuts, exacerbated by the poor communication from UKRI around how the cuts were to be handled and what was and was not possible, and with grief and pain over what would be lost as a result of the cuts. As a colleague in Pakistan observed:

‘There are things that we want to achieve, that we want to change ... So there’s a lot of you know that you can make a difference. Kind of a hope attached to it, that you’ve suddenly endangered.’ (Co-investigator, Pakistan)

While eventually all three projects managed to maintain their contracted research partnerships, the emotional challenges of the budget cuts resonated across the partners. For GCRF-funded projects where jobs were lost and/or contractually committed funds were withdrawn from partner organisations, the emotional costs are likely to be even higher. Feelings of guilt, anger and disappointment were particularly pronounced for UK researchers – which included all the principal investigators – who felt simultaneously betrayed and embarrassed by the UK government and culpable for disappointing their project partners and co-investigators, while feeling anxious because of the lack of communication from the research council:

‘We’ve let everybody down. We’ve really you know, we built with the launch, we built so much expectation ... then a week later, we have to slam on the

brakes ... it actually makes me feel quite sad ... but there's very little we can do because we still haven't had clear guidance from the funding bodies.'
(Principal investigator, UK)

Undermining trust in the UK government

Research partners expressed their shock and deep disappointment at the UK government's failure to respect contractual obligations – international standards of legal integrity that participants previously thought to be inviolable. A colleague in Colombia highlighted their shock that the cuts implied legal contracts could be violated:

'In Colombia, we are very strict with the law. If you have a project ... this is the money that they are going to give you and you sign it already there is no way that they will be like, "sorry, we changed our mind". We may have less money in Colombia ... but ... when money comes from the Colombian Government, they will not change their mind in the middle of the project.'
(Co-investigator, Colombia)

Similar sentiments were expressed by investigators across partner countries with one co-Investigator in Pakistan pointing to the irony of a government from the Global North – with its claims of 'superior, model governance' – renegeing on its contractual commitment:

'The perspective tends to be that it's the developing world that has these kinds of problems where you know, funds will disappear ... but in this case it was ... the UK Government which was saying that committed funds were not available any longer. So there was a moment of ... a strange role reversal.'
(Co-investigator, Pakistan)

In cutting funds to these projects, the UK government violated the rule of law that is, by its own admission, the core purpose of the UK Government Legal Department² and goes against the FCDO's³ own assertion, laid out in its 2019 position paper on governance and inclusive development, that good governance 'relies on government willingness and capacity to perform core functions such as providing security, the rule of law, and justice' (DFID, 2019: 6). This points to contradictions between the government's actions and its espoused commitments. In interviews, participants reported that they had assumed or trusted that the UK would uphold established principles of law and order, notably honouring signed legal agreements to which UK institutions were signatories. As another Pakistani co-investigator noted:

'To be honest, I didn't think it was going to affect us ... The contract was signed ... The assumption was you know if you worked hard, you put the proposal together, you went through the interview. They're saying you've got the grant ... the expectation wasn't that the funds that have been allotted are going to be cut. I thought it would be for future funding.'
(Co-investigator, Pakistan)

The immediate decline in trust in the UK government by all project partners was accompanied by increased efforts by project principal investigators, who worked closely with partners to revise budgets in ways that would protect contractual commitments. In some cases, these budget planning processes mitigated the damage, and strengthened trust and solidarity among project organisations and individuals, including those in the UK. A project partner from Pakistan noted:

‘The whole process has been genuinely collaborative in the sense that from the start, [the principal investigator] invited our input ... The anger and frustration is more towards government policies and all of that. But yeah, I personally felt really bad for my colleagues in the UK, because I’ve seen how much they’ve worked.’ (Civil society partner, Pakistan)

The impact of ODA cuts damaged the reputation of the UK internationally and undermined the UK government’s narrative on ‘Global Britain’ as a leader in science and research in the wake of Brexit. The cuts served to communicate what the UK does and does not value, which is fundamentally at odds with the values required to forge equitable partnerships. The government’s handling of the GCRF budget cuts undermined their own objectives of good governance and equitable partnerships between the Global North and South. While across the three projects, partners and staff universally condemned the conduct of the UK government, it became apparent that in many cases respect among these partners was validated and/or strengthened as the UK-based principal investigators led collaborative and transparent discussions to resolve the untenable position in which they had all been placed.

An important finding of this study was that the UK-based principal investigators were instrumental in avoiding potential disaster for research partnerships, and that research communities of practice were similarly instrumental in mitigating the harm caused by the neoliberal directive to ‘reprofile’. In Colombia, a research partner noted the difference between their trust in the UK government, compared to their UK partners, a recurrent refrain in the data:

‘I think that, in terms of the UK government ... if there is any other circumstance that they could justify to keep on cutting things they will do it ... but on the other side, I do trust completely that [the UK-based researchers and principal investigator] are doing the best they can.’ (Civil society partner, Colombia).

There is a significant body of work exploring the effects of neoliberal policies and values in higher education on academics’ work and identities, including for those who hold opposing political and philosophical views (for example, [Giroux, 2004](#); [Ahmed, 2012](#)). Studies have demonstrated how neoliberal values can be in tension with some core aspects of professional academic identity ([Di Leo, 2013](#)) as well as collective research identities ([Wilson and Holligan, 2013](#)). Accordingly, academics may resist neoliberal practices by finding strategies to contravene harmful directives and mitigate harm in service of their own agendas and values. For these three GCRF-funded projects, principal investigators provided reassurance of their values and ongoing commitment to research partnerships and teams worked in tandem to redesign projects and budgets in order to still deliver some of their objectives. Participants’ accounts highlight the value of academic identities and partnerships

involving strong human relationships between colleagues, some of whom had openly discussed and agreed joint values of collaboration, transparency, kindness and social justice as the keystones underpinning the ongoing success of these research projects.

Unethical conduct of the funder

Participants highlighted the failure of the UKRI to adhere to sectoral and its own systems of research governance, including those related to ethical practice, transparency and accountability. The way in which the cuts were communicated by UKRI to affected projects and institutions was criticised as ‘vague’, ‘opaque’ and ‘disorganised’. After leaked information reached projects, there was a long wait for formal communication, an absence of clear timelines, and minimal engagement from the funders directly with project principal investigators and teams. We acknowledge that this chain of communication was complex, with UKRI awaiting guidance from BEIS before disseminating this to the research councils under the UKRI umbrella, which then shared it with universities. Teams within UKRI and its councils were also imperilled by the GCRF cuts and probably also faced emotional tolls akin to those described earlier. However, ethical principles and safeguarding exist to be applied and offer guidance in complex and challenging situations, and instead of turning to these, respondents felt the funder largely abandoned its duty of care.

Before any official communication was made with projects, news of the cuts was leaked, with many hearing this for the first time on social media through rumours and speculation on WhatsApp and Twitter. When formal communications did come, these were directed to vice chancellors and other senior university leaders rather than project leads, who received cascaded communication via their university research offices. This made it very difficult for principal investigators to share information clearly and transparently with project teams or to have a sense of autonomy in responding to the situation. As a UK project team member explained:

‘We were told about the overall cut in ODA funding in November, and then it took till March for it to filter through to the specific [way] it would directly affect our grant. The messaging coming out was so vague and it still is ... I kept getting messages from people say, “oh, we were expecting you ... to follow up” and we just couldn’t. Because we just did not know what was going on.’ (Project manager, UK)

UKRI delegated decision making around cuts to university vice chancellors, who were made responsible for university-level reprofiles of their ‘GCRF portfolios’. The reprofiling exercises were intended to identify which projects could weather the cuts and which should be terminated. In adopting this strategy, UKRI abandoned its role as a research partner engaged in a reciprocal relationship with the wider academic community and the individual research projects that it funds. Instead, the approach opened the possibility for projects to be pitted against one another within institutions and projects faced differing prospects for surviving the cuts based on the approach adopted by their university. In addition, research active universities, largely in the Russell Group, received higher levels of GCRF Quality Related Research funding (QR) which they were able to access to support projects experiencing cuts to their budgets, whereas projects based at ‘less research intensive’ university with smaller QR

allocations did not have the resources to offer such support. This left projects in such universities more vulnerable to the cuts. This ran counter to the GCRF ethos of inclusion and support for universities with less-developed track records of winning research funding, who may have more diverse staff populations (UKRI, 2021b).

When judged against ethical expectations for research conduct, which include as a bare minimum expectations of honesty, transparency, clear communication and respect for research participants, the approach taken by UKRI is profoundly unethical. Participants across the UK research teams connected the cuts themselves and the (mis)management of them as a fundamental breach of basic research ethics principles.

‘The withdrawal of funding, I would suggest, has gone fundamentally against the basics of ethics principles in UK research. And that to me has a much more substantial impact than almost anything else because it erodes any moral authority of researchers to act ... if you look at the BERA [the British Educational Research Association] guidelines or, if you look at medical guidelines, the key principle/priority is to do no harm and the cuts, as they were implemented, clearly did harm.’ (Co-investigator, UK)

The hypocrisy of UKRI requiring increasingly onerous and tick-box oriented ethical, safeguarding and risk assurance processes, including at proposal stage, while not adhering to these principles in the management of research funding, was not lost on participants. They highlighted how UKRI’s own accountability structures were circumvented in the implementation of the cuts. A UK principal investigator argued that despite ‘a lot of time and money assembling expertise of those people who are meant to be guiding the work’, GCRF Advisory Boards hosted by research councils were not consulted on how to most ethically implement the cuts, leading to the resignation of many of their members after the cuts were announced (Imperiale and Phipps, 2022). Researchers felt the principles to which they were held accountable by both UKRI and their institutions were circumvented and ignored in the process of implementing the cuts, compromising their own abilities to act ethically and undermining their expectations for ethical reciprocity from research councils and universities.

Paternalism, coloniality and the hypocrisies of aid

In examining the impact and implications of the budget cuts on equitable partnership and research governance, the continued legacies of colonialism and Empire in shaping the research landscape were highlighted by respondents. A colleague based in the UK described how extractive structures persist in the way international research ‘partnerships’ (Perry et al, 2022) are managed. She explained her initial reservations with the GCRF given how it maintained paternalistic and colonial assumptions around Northern researchers solving problems located in the South and building Southern research capacity:

‘It’s a colonial model and you can’t engage ethically with it, and I remember thinking ... we’ve got these strong existing relationships ... there are ways that we can push back ... we’re going to try ... when that message came [about budget cuts] I just kept thinking ... there’s no consideration for ethical partnership and I felt ... shame, I felt like, I, you know, convinced people to trust us and join in this project and here we are.’ (Principal investigator, UK)

Researchers described how GCRF had been a space where attempts were made to acknowledge and challenge the coloniality of North–South collaborative research practices. They also reflected on the speed at which this space was closed by the cuts and their management, suggesting lip service rather than genuine commitment to challenging coloniality from UKRI, BEIS and the UK government.

Other partners argued that a global pandemic meant unprecedented actions on the part of governments, including the UK's. However, they questioned not just the way in which such measures were implemented but also the extent to which the ODA budget cuts were the result of pandemic-related economic pressures or were driven by the Conservative government's pre-existing ideological commitments. A colleague in Pakistan noted:

'From the perspective of someone who is sitting in the Global South, [ODA is] almost like a reparation's kind of a way that you might think about it, right? So you're thinking about you've colonised half the world. And now you are offering ODA as a means of offering something in exchange for all that you took. So if you think about it that way, then obviously it's basically saying that we don't feel that way anymore. We don't feel like we have a responsibility anymore for having taken resources away.' (Co-investigator, Pakistan)

Far from rebalancing inequitable partnerships, the budget cuts ended up reinforcing power asymmetries based on dominant UK ideologies and interests. The imbalance is located within a larger history of colonialism, and in an existing context of the demand for reparations and justice. As a colleague in Colombia noted:

'Yeah, we are definitely working with a very conservative government that has no sense of responsibility, because in the end this type of project is not a favour that they do us ... we are used to having this feeling that anything that give us it's kind of like, "thank you, thank you, you are so generous", no, it's not generosity, they have a responsibility [to people] around the world for the things that they have done.' (Co-investigator, Colombia)

In 2022, the National Audit Office documented how damaging the management of the humanitarian aid cuts were in this respect. Some 15 FCDO country and regional offices were told to independently implement the 50 per cent cuts to their previous years' allocations. Yet they were directly advised by ministers to not discuss the cuts with their local partners (NAO, 2022). The removal of local voices from the development of possible mitigation and harm reduction strategies was an epistemic injustice that served to undermine the ethos of collaboration and hamper the management of the cuts.

This unilateral action from the UK caused reputational harm to future research partnerships. A partner in Pakistan observed:

'I would never have thought of that before ... You have to be like "OK until the money comes to our university, no guarantees" ... All bets are off, so it's no longer that kind of certainty ... That's something that definitely comes with what has happened.' (Civil society partner, Pakistan)

Another partner in Uganda aptly captured the power dynamics, the disappointment and lack of trust with the following analogy:

‘Let me give the example like this ... in a family, a child, when the father decided, “no I’m not buying you a candy”, you see how the child will look at the father, at a certain angle ...’ (Postdoctoral researcher, Uganda)

Political agendas

While noting the legacy of colonial relations, respondents also made connections to the wider neoliberal, marketised landscape of higher education in the UK. They pointed to a UK government that is increasingly moving away from ‘independent socially committed civic research’ to one dominated by ‘engineering, innovation, business enhancement’ evident in the appointment of a ‘businessman whose background is in Shell and fossil fuel industries’ as chair of UKRI (Co-investigator, UK). The cuts were believed to be more than simply budgetary constraints linked to COVID-19 but rather:

‘the further marketisation and instrumentalisation of research in relation to a very narrow, nationalistic view of Global Britain.’ (Principal investigator, UK)

For one UK staff member, the cuts were clearly seen as ‘a populist move’ which had been on the ‘government’s agenda’ with COVID-19 operating as a convenient excuse. For them, the ODA cuts were a political move, motivated not by economic circumstances and a genuine need to cut public expenditure, but an insular political agenda that originated prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

One partner in Pakistan, following this suspicion, also asked if there was any transparency about how the funds cut from the ODA budget were being used for COVID-19 relief efforts by the government. Partners who had previous experience with UK research were also making these connections:

‘If you follow British politics, you know that they’ve been talking about this for a very, very long time, and so it’s been a long time coming ... It’s just you never expected it to hit in this way, I think and that was very clear from the reaction from UK partners.’ (Civil society partner, Pakistan)

The suspicion that this decision was more ideological than economic was also highlighted by a project partner in Uganda:

‘The UK government does not prioritise research documents. So if there is anything that needs to be done in order to readjust the budget, research is one of those ... if it was a very, very big priority, it wouldn’t be touched. Yet research is one of the things that generates knowledge that gives solutions to many things as if it’s the backbone of every decision you must make.’ (Civil society partner, Uganda)

The project teams in partner countries particularly expressed their disappointment and shock that the UK would choose this time, a global pandemic, to cut ODA – given the difficult state in which many poorer countries already found themselves. They felt the cuts undermined previous statements of solidarity and responsibility

that underpinned UK aid commitments and brought to the fore a self-interested and calculating UK government. A Cambodian respondent recounted how the ODA budget cuts were announced just as the pandemic was easing up and social movement was becoming easier again. This followed many hard months, including the second and third waves of COVID-19, lockdowns, delays to research, and new planning processes to implement the research safely and in line with government restrictions: 'then the cut was made so it will be dramatically difficult'. For this respondent, the decision to cut ODA at this difficult time was a violation beyond law and governance, the UK cuts represented a withdrawal from a moral and ethical commitment to support people and nations who are in need, and who have fewer resources than them. It was even more despicable that this decision was taken at a time that these countries were especially struggling.

Conclusions: Implications for research governance and international partnerships

While the future prospects of the GCRF remain uncertain, the three projects featured in this paper continue. They all reprofiled their budgets in ways that were able to preserve jobs associated with the projects and all contractual commitments to partners in OECD DAC countries. After the data was collected for this paper, UKRI announced that GCRF budgets are secure for the 2022/23 and 2023/24 financial years and even returned a portion of the funds cut in the 2021/22 year to universities. The rollercoaster that colleagues working on GCRF-funded projects experienced in spring 2021 appears to have calmed. However, the implications of the GCRF budget cuts and their handling extend beyond the affected projects and the GCRF portfolio. The evidence considered above has implications for research governance systems and conditions for equitable international research partnerships moving forward.

The GCRF case exposes inadequacies in existing research governance arrangements. As discussed, risks are increasingly offloaded onto researchers and research projects which face increasingly onerous processes to ensure research ethics, safeguarding and due process (due diligence, contracting and finance procedures). Researchers are expected to assume accountability for the risks associated with their projects and to uphold ethical standards to do no harm, commitments that they take seriously. UKRI, like other funding agencies, requires these governance arrangements as a condition of funding but, as the handling of the GCRF cuts demonstrate, remains unaccountable itself to these same standards. It is important to acknowledge that UKRI did not author the cuts and that its operations were also imperilled by them. These acknowledgements, however, do not diminish the importance of highlighting the unethical conduct on the part of the funder in managing the cuts and the hypocrisy in failing to apply the standards it requires of those that it funds.

The cuts raise further questions about the adequacy of ethical approval processes within universities, which granted ethical approval for GCRF research based on an evaluation of anticipated benefits and risks to participants. In none of the three projects included here was the withdrawal of funding considered to be a potential risk. This unforeseen risk occurred, with the harmful consequences documented here, included the reduced impact of projects' social benefit and the emotional harms to the project teams. These findings pose a fundamental challenge to future ethical

review processes for UKRI-funded research and raise questions about what strategies researchers might sensibly put in place to mitigate unforeseen budget cuts. Applying the principles of due diligence to this case, the past un/reliability of the funder is a factor that must be considered in ethical review processes.

Finally, the cuts illustrate the tenuousness of institutional commitments to equitable South–North partnerships within the UK research ecosystem. Since the events we have described, UKRI have hosted numerous events on equitable partnerships and issued principles on this topic (for example, UKRI, 2022), without referring to the ways in which the UK government's ODA cuts and UKRI's handling of them undermined existing partnerships built over many years. The gap between rhetorical commitments and the realities of partnerships has always been considerable (for example, Perry et al, 2022). This particular case provides further evidence of the distance still to travel in establishing more equitable partnerships between Southern and Northern researchers. Nevertheless, evidence from the focus groups also suggests important areas in which GCRF was making progress, for example, in terms of Southern partners playing 'a leading role in problem identification [and] research design and development' (Grieve and Mitchell, 2020: 516). As we have seen, this can be quickly undermined when control of the purse strings remains firmly with Northern partners, and when politics intrudes on research agendas. The cuts and their effects as illustrated here demonstrate the coloniality at the heart of the GCRF project, including the coldness with which the GCRF was able to withdraw its benevolence. The cuts also demonstrated the strength of the human relationships that underpin research collaboration as well as the strain on individuals and projects as they are solely responsible with the duty of care that the research ecosystem should uphold.

Despite the hopes of some participants in this study that GCRF funding for research, and UK aid more widely, might be framed as a reparation, the callousness of the cuts and their administration illustrates the ethical distance between the current research landscape of heightened accountability and governance and one in which reparative relationships that shift power and resource might be nurtured.

Notes

- ¹ The 0.7 per cent of GDP for Official Development Assistance was first adopted in the 'International Development Strategy for the Second United Nations Development Decade', UN General Assembly Resolution 2626 (XXV), 24 October 1970, paragraph 43. It has been repeatedly endorsed in international meetings and resolutions, up to the present day.
- ² The Government Legal Department website states, 'Our core purpose is to help the government to rule well, within the rule of law': <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/government-legal-department>
- ³ Named the 'Department for International Development' at the time, given the administrative organisation.

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Data availability statement

The authors take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the analysis. The data is not available to other researchers.

Conflict of interest

Julia Paulson is an Associate Editor of *Global Social Challenges* and is one of the authors of this article.

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