

Executive Summary

Introduction: At the request of the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC), UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and the Wellcome Trust, Leeds Beckett University (LBU) conducted an independent review of the UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR). A full report and recommendations has been provided to these sponsors; this summary brings together the overall findings and a synthesis for the main questions set for the review.

UKCDR and the review: In November 2015, the UK government announced ‘a whole of government approach’ to official development assistance (ODA) including for funding research and development relating to low- and middle-income countries (LMIC). This anticipated a wide range of R&D funding and delivery bodies with a need for a stronger focus for collaboration. UKCDR was set up in 2018 to succeed an earlier convening body, aiming to:

“... amplify the value and impact of research for global development by promoting coherence, collaboration and joint action among UK research funders.”

UKCDR operates as an independent, neutral body under the strategic direction of the high-level Strategic Coherence of ODA-funded Research (SCOR) Board with oversight delegated to the Officials Group of its sponsors – BEIS, DHSC, FCDO, UKRI and the Wellcome Trust. Activities focus on four strategic pillars: evidence mapping and foresight; knowledge exchange and sharing good practice; convening ‘added-value’ collaborations; and providing a collective voice for policy. The review looked across these aims and activities to assess its achievements and impacts against expectations, and implications for future strategy and funding. It has drawn together past documentation, management and monitoring information, with feedback from 160 individuals in over 50 stakeholder organisations.

UKCDR performance and achievements: The findings of the review suggest UKCDR has achieved a great deal since 2018 in delivering its work programme and within limited resources. It has built a strong performance culture across its small secretariat, producing often valued outputs assembled collaboratively with funding and delivery bodies and other partners. UKCDR’s convening infrastructure has been valued by ‘core members’ as filling a need for stakeholders to go beyond networking to focus on added value, task-based collaborations especially. These achievements align well with the strategic priorities set by the SCOR Board; UKCDR have been agile, responsive to many stakeholders, as anticipated in UKCDR’s theory of change (ToC), and adaptive to emerging ‘crisis’ issues.

The stakeholders more engaged with UKCDR generally regarded its working arrangements and the quality of outputs highly, with its workstreams seen as relevant and with substantial additionality. Set against this, UKCDR quality assurance was seen as burdensome by some stakeholders. Through convening, UKCDR has established a profile in the UK as a valued focus for knowledge exchange and collaboration, although this profile appears less well developed internationally. UKCDR’s communication activities have underpinned many of these achievements, although this lacks a cross-strategy focus. Alongside UKCDR’s other ‘secretariat’ functions, it has also operated under acute staff resourcing pressures impairing developments in areas such as relationship management and social media development.

UKCDR's achievements have been delivered while also transforming from a legacy body not previously highly regarded by funders. While largely cost-effective, the new organisational arrangements continue to mature, and issues for its expected route to impacts and for efficacy remain, including for staffing arrangements; a better integrated work programme; moving away from a perceived largely health-centric focus; and more efficient and tangible arrangements for UKCDR's workstream prioritisation and associated capacity management.

UKCDR and its stakeholder relationships: The review examined the management relationships with both SCOR and with the Officials Group, and also with other stakeholders. The high-level composition of **SCOR** has raised the profile and credibility of UKCDR with UK stakeholders, although with less effect outside the UK. UKCDR-SCOR relationships have sought to make best use of the limited time of SCOR members but have scope to better engage, and make more effective use of, SCOR potential. SCOR has delegated UKCDR oversight to the **Officials Group** where members have a correspondingly more hands-on relationship with the secretariat and its work programme. The active relationships with the Officials Group have been critical to sustaining UKCDR performance at times of resource stress and turbulence, notably when the onset of the pandemic required a reprioritisation of the workplan. The group has eased access to sources, contributed to quality control and provided additional project resources, although placing considerable demands on members.

For **other stakeholders**, UKCDR has successfully accommodated the different engagement needs of many 'core' members. Relationships are deepest with sponsor organisations and UKCDR's standing group membership. Beyond 'core members,' and against expectations, the convening and more informal task and project group arrangements worked less well for sustaining relationships, including for wider international relationships. Overall, UKCDR's engagements with most core stakeholders have achieved much over the review period, but they are not universally valued and there is scope for improvement in the (narrow) focus for stakeholder account management and in relationship management systems.

UKCDR's impact contributions: Impacts from UKCDR are difficult to identify and impractical to attribute as these are not achieved directly by UKCDR. Impacts are expected to stem from stakeholders' changes to policy and practices deriving (bilaterally) from a likely chain of influences within those organisations. UKCDR has yet to rise to the challenge of effectively monitoring and tracking its own impact contributions, so uptake of, and contributions to outcomes from, UKCDR actions and how these come about lacks tangibility.

UKCDR's Safeguarding workstream provides evidence of tangible impacts and where SCOR championing was a key success factor. Tangible impact contributions also come from COVID-CIRCLE in guiding funder priorities and reducing funding overlap or duplication including outside the UK. In other workstreams including Equitable Partnerships, the African country studies, and the African-UK Fellowships review, UKCDR's work is often valued by stakeholders, but has yet to translate into tangible impacts in the ways anticipated in its theory of change. The review suggests a need for prioritisation of follow-through activities to intensify impacts among stakeholders.

Synthesised findings: The review was set nine specific research questions to address and findings for each are summarised below.

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| <p>1. Across UKCDR's four strategic aims a) what resources have been input and b) what have been the most significant outputs and achievements during this period?</p> | <p><u>Resources:</u> Resource inputs have been consistent with budget allocations and where cost-effectiveness has been enhanced through UKRI HR support and accommodation and facilities provided by Wellcome. Resource capacity and its responsiveness has been increased by internships, staff loans and short-term attachments from sponsors.</p> <p><u>Outputs and achievements:</u> Workstream outputs have been substantial, harnessing limited resources and intensively producing widely valued outputs. Achievements aligned well to UKCDR's strategic aims and were accomplished while also transforming the pre-2018 arrangements for convening and collaboration. Delivery arrangements have also responded speedily and largely effectively to the challenges presented to convening and collaboration by the pandemic.</p> |
| <p>2. What can be established about users and uses of UKCDR's website and reports?</p> | <p><u>Website:</u> The UKCDR website has seen a three-fold increase in use (2018-2020), slowing into 2021. It is valued by regular users for functionality, content navigation and as a focus for knowledge (and resource) sharing. User evidence is limited but suggests it has particular value for users across the research councils. Use is polarised with (limited) survey feedback suggesting just over a quarter of very regular users are counterbalanced by nearly a third using it rarely or not at all. Web-based communication also includes a maintained social media presence although with scope for enlargement.</p> <p><u>Reports:</u> UKCDR reports have been valued by a wide range of stakeholders and are seen as professionally produced and accessible. Use is most extensive among UK-based funders and delivery partners. Resources linked to reports such as guidelines and case studies are valued more highly; policy briefs have yet to have much profile.</p> |
| <p>3. What types of outcomes and impacts result from UKCDR's events, reports and communications?</p> | <p>Outcomes and impacts monitoring by UKCDR is limited, although for some workstreams any outcome assessment would be premature. Where outcomes are observed, these include uptake of better practice-based funder guidance (eg Safeguarding) for R&D and delivery organisations. There is some evidence of clearer prioritisation and avoided duplication of ODA funded activity notably from COVID-CIRCLE. UKCDR communications have supported dissemination of reports, but uptake and utilisation would be enhanced by more priority to UKCDR's follow through activity.</p> |
| <p>4. What contributions has UKCDR made to shaping policy and practice?</p> | <p>From the available information, except in a few cases it is challenging to identify the contributions made to shaping policy and practice. Significant contributions to likely improved practice have been achieved from the COVID-CIRCLE programme and from the Safeguarding workstream but are more obscure from other activities. Policy impacts observed have emphasised evidence or insight contributions to funding priorities for new R&D programmes.</p> |
| <p>5. What are the key factors which have enabled and constrained achievements and impacts?</p> | <p><u>Success factors</u> have emphasised the combination of UKCDR's convening power and especially from 'convening dialogue' (ToC Pathway 1) with project-based analysis and UKCDR-led knowledge exchange (Pathway 2). Others are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The quality of executive leadership and the commitment, flexibilities and proactivity of UKCDR staff. • Relevance and responsiveness of the work programme and fast response to 'crisis' and cross-cutting issues. • Independence providing for stakeholders to engage confidently in trusted, non-competitive relationships. |

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| | <p><u>Constraints</u> have included staffing and associated resource constraints hampering UKCDR efforts, placing acute pressures on some staff and contributing to recent high levels of staff turnover. Others include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indistinct processes for shaping and influencing work prioritisation for UKCDR. • A work programme thought to emphasise health-related themes and giving a lower priority to some important emerging areas for ODA coherence and collaboration. • Indistinct or confused organisational image and understanding beyond 'core member' stakeholders. <p>Additionally, immature processes for (wider) stakeholder management, relationship building, and constrained staff and communications resources have held back the ToC aspiration for UKCDR to be 'a single source' on ODA research.</p> |
| 6. Based on the evidence have certain strategic aim(s) progressed more effectively than others? | <p>Achievements were aligned well to three of UKCDR's four strategic aims with most progress for 'mapping and insight' in specific areas. 'Knowledge exchange' and (many aspects of) 'convening' have also progressed. Early impacts have been clearest for 'mapping and insight' and 'knowledge exchange'. Progression with the fourth strategic aim for providing a 'collective voice' has been less clear with uncertain ambition and consequently diverse stakeholder expectations.</p> |
| 7. How well has UKCDR worked in tandem with the SCOR Board and the Officials Group to promote collaboration, coherence and good practice among UK ODA research funders? | <p><u>SCOR Board</u>: SCOR has raised the UK profile of UKCDR and contributed to its strategic focus and some specific themes, raising its credibility among stakeholders who clearly value its high-level constituency. SCOR-UKCDR working relationships have been channelled through the UKCDR executive director. An imbalance between 'health' and other member expertise and between 'departmental' and 'independent' members of SCOR has recently been addressed.</p> <p><u>Officials Group</u>: The Officials Group has deeper relationships with (more) UKCDR staff through its oversight role. Both multi-lateral and bi-lateral working relationships are effective. These place considerable demands on members but with added value for UKCDR work programme and resource prioritisation, additional resourcing and quality assurance.</p> |
| 8. To what extent has networking with other UK and international body's added influence and value? | <p>UKCDR has developed project-based and effective collaborations with other UK and international bodies but has limited capacity to sustain these. Relationships with UK bodies heavily emphasises 'core members' and has limited reach beyond these including to the wider higher education sector. Networking with international bodies is constrained by resources and UKCDR's 'UK' focus; some non-governmental international bodies are cautious about links with UKCDR and are unclear about its independence from government as reflected in SCOR membership.</p> |
| 9. How well positioned is UKCDR to deliver future impact and what changes to strategy and activity, if any, would likely enhance the range and/or levels of influence and impact? | <p>UKCDR is well placed to build on the widely trusted and effective convening and early collaborative foundations established since 2018. Its strategic aims are appropriate to focus future activity but with clarification needed about who and what is represented by 'collective voice.' There is scope for intensifying its contribution to policy and practice impacts by resourcing and prioritising 'follow-on' activities from workstream deliverables and a more strategic approach to UKCDR communications. While widely cost-effective, there is scope to enhance UKCDR efficiencies in a number of identified areas and to reflect the needs for accelerating this in the post 2022 strategy and resourcing commitments.</p> |

Lessons for improvement

Since 2018, UKCDR has been widely effective in harnessing its limited resources to provide diverse stakeholders with valued convening opportunities, and responsive project outputs, often assembled and disseminated in a short space of time. The review evidence suggests that in a changing funding landscape, this provides a solid foundation for building on UKCDR's developing reputation as a trusted focus for supporting coherence, collaboration and joint activity in development research in the UK. It is also a platform for a new strategy (from 2022) to widening UKCDR's engagement and reach to optimise the value of collaboration and accelerate its own impact contributions. A number of areas of review are proposed to inform that strategy, with inter-related recommendations for UKCDR to assess:

- The need for better integrated and more consistent communications across the current three-tiers of management of UKCDR's work programme performance and progression towards its strategic aims (Recommendation 1).
- The intent for UKCDR to provide for and better communicate a 'collective voice to shape policy' which is consistent with UKCDR's neutrality and independence in fulfilling other strategic aims (Recommendation 2)
- The need for the new strategy to integrate an impact aspiration for UKCDR convening and collaboration to stimulate and demonstrate uptake and application of UKCDR's knowledge and good practice outputs (Recommendation 3).
- The scope and resourcing implications for UKCDR to extend its stakeholder reach by appropriately engaging a wider range of funding and delivery actors (Recommendation 4).
- The utility, focus and constitution of the current six standing groups and the value of further widening membership beyond 'core' members (recommendation 5).
- The effectiveness of current UKCDR arrangements for stakeholder relationship management with a view to adopting proportionate and systematic arrangements as part of UKCDR's likely new communications strategy (Recommendation 6).
- The need for enhanced MEL arrangements by UKCDR to provide more coherent support to management information, operational and strategic oversight which integrate a more effective approach to demonstrating UKCDR's outcome and impact contributions (Recommendation 7).
- The need for greater transparency in how workstreams are formulated and the implications for strategic clustering and cross-fertilisation of UKCDR activity better aligned to UKCDR capacity (Recommendation 8).
- The need for modified staff recruitment, development and retention, consistent with UKRI management of UKCDR staffing, to better align capacity with necessary UKCDR agility, responsiveness and enhanced stakeholder engagement (Recommendation 9).
- Recent and prospective demand in UKCDR work programmes for data analytic and related skills and implications for building resilience in UKCDR's necessary expertise and capacity in this area (Recommendation 10).

While UKCDR's convening and collaboration model has generally worked in ways which were consistent with expectations (as in its theory of change), it has yet to demonstrate this for expectations of how it contributes to tangible changes to policy and practice for funders, delivery partners and policymakers. A key issue for strategy is how to amplify this potential

for impact contributions, and demonstrate its effects, through greater emphasis on providing 'follow through' from current and future workstreams.

The review also encourages the 2022-26 strategy to sustain actions in place for developing an ambitious UKCDR Communications Strategy and reformed UKCDR staff recruitment, development and retention arrangements to provide for more stability and to meet emerging skills and knowledge needs.

UKCDR's transformation since 2018 has demonstrated an appetite for, and value of, convening, collaboration and joint working, and early evidence of positive impacts for funders and delivery partners in the UK. The need for this, through UKCDR, is enlarged not reduced by constrained ODA R&D funds. The review concludes that UKCDR's successes are worth building on, including addressing these recommendations, and this is likely to be consistent with a moderate increase in budgetary commitments for the new strategy.