



Research for development:

the meaning of equity in
funder-level partnerships

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About UKCDR

The UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR) brings together government and research funders working in international development. We exist to amplify the value and impact of research for global development by promoting coherence, collaboration, and joint action among UK research funders. Our core contributing members include the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC); the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT); the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO); UK Research and Innovation (UKRI); and Wellcome. For further information on UKCDR, please visit ukcdr.org.uk.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

COSTECH	Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology
CRAs	Collaborative Research Actions
DFG	Germany's Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
DHSC	UK Department of Health and Social Care
DSIT	UK Department for Science, Innovation and Technology
EDCTP	European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership
ESSENCE	ESSENCE on Health Research
FCDO	UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
GloPID-R	Global Research Collaboration for Infectious Disease Preparedness
GRC	Global Research Council
HIC	High-Income Country
IDRC	Canada's International Development Research Centre
JST	Japan Science and Technology Agency
LDC	Least Developed Country
LMIC	Low- and Middle-Income Country
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MRC	South Africa's Medical Research Council
NACOSTI	Kenya's National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation
NCRST	Namibia's National Commission on Research Science and Technology
NOW	Dutch Research Council
NRF	South Africa's National Research Foundation
ODA	Official Development Assistance
SGCI	Science Granting Councils Initiative
UKCDR	UK Collaborative on Development Research
UKRI	UK Research and Innovation

Executive Summary

Equity in research partnerships has been a concern within international development research policy for many years. However, there has been increasing momentum around this topic (ESSENCE and UKCDR, 2022), with calls to address the underlying issues that create imbalances between partners. Alongside academic work, there is increasing attention on this issue within the research policy space, evidenced by a growing number of initiatives, guidance documents, and reports.

Discussion about equitable partnerships often focuses on the divide between High-Income Countries (HICs) and Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs). The HIC-funder-LMIC-recipient model is still predominant, bringing both benefits and challenges. On the one hand, HIC-funder-LMIC-recipient partnerships can significantly contribute to achieving development impact. On the other hand, the inherent unfairness and asymmetry in these partnerships is a significant concern.

This study focused on one aspect of equity in research partnerships: funder-level partnerships. There is a paucity of information about equity at the funder level within current debates. UKCDR intends this report to further understanding on a finding from UKCDR and ESSENCE's *Four Approaches to Supporting Equitable Research Partnerships*, which identifies equity within funder-level partnerships as one area that could catalyse changes within the research partnership ecosystem.

This study consulted with research funding organisations based in both HICs and LMICs and found important underlying differences in how equity was understood and experienced in partnerships. While HIC-based funders saw equity as a priority for supporting development agendas within LMICs, their focus leaned toward equity at the research level rather than within funder-level partnerships. For HIC-based funders, equity was a priority for supporting international development agendas within LMICs, however they tended to be more interested in equity at the research level.

Through analysis of semi-structured interviews with 23 representatives of funders in HICs and LMICs, we found that for LMIC-based funders, equity within funder-level relationships was not an explicit concern, rather partnerships were shaped by the challenges of inter-institutional collaboration in an unequal world. For LMIC-based funders, challenges with partnership building were not framed as being about equity but seen as part of the process of building collaborations.

This suggests equity is a systemic challenge requiring changes to all areas of the global research system. However, there are actions that can be taken to improve how research funders engage with each other to support a re-balancing of the global research system and drive change. This report distils and maps insights and areas for action onto UKCDR and ESSENCE's *Four Approaches to Supporting Equitable Research Partnerships*. The four approaches are: (1) Support the research partnership ecosystem; (2) Strengthen research relationships and research systems; (3) Budget for partnership building; and (4) Implement processes and procedures that sustain partnerships.

Although implementing equity at the funder level can be a part of addressing equity in the overall global research ecosystem, it is not the primary equity challenge for most research funders, especially those in LMICs. This suggests that change cannot be addressed within individual funder-level partnerships but rather requires efforts across different parts of the research system.

Setting the scene

“Partnerships where equity is prioritised are more sustainable than those that don't... taking into account equity issues is one of those strengthening factors.”

— HIC-based funder

Equity in research partnerships has been a concern within international development research policy for many years. However, recent years have seen increasing momentum around this topic (ESSENCE and UKCDR, 2022), with calls to move beyond equitable partnerships and toward addressing the underlying issues that create imbalances between partners.

Proposals include strengthening Southern agency (Ordóñez Llanos, A. et al., 2024), adopting transformative approaches to rebalance the position of Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) (Aboderin, I. et al., 2023), and decolonising knowledge for development (Taylor, P. and Tremblay, C., 2022). Alongside academic work, there is increasing attention on this issue within the research policy space, evidenced by a growing number of initiatives, guidance documents, and reports. Examples include the [Africa Charter for Transformative Research Collaborations](#) and Southern Voice's work on [envisioning an equitable future for research across the North-South divide](#).

Discussion about equitable partnerships often focuses on the divide between High-Income Countries (HICs) and LMICs. In the research for development landscape, the HIC-funder-LMIC-recipient model is still predominant, bringing both benefits and challenges. On the one hand, HIC-funder-LMIC-recipient partnerships can significantly contribute to achieving development impact (Bucher, A. et al., 2020, de Wit, H. and Altbach, P.G., 2021). On the other hand, the inherent unfairness and asymmetry in these partnerships is a significant concern (Bradley, M. 2008, Grieve, T and Mitchell, R, 2020, Crane, J.T., 2020). This report examines the impact of power dynamics exhibited within HIC-funder-LMIC-recipient partnerships on other parts of the research ecosystem, namely, between funders of research. There is increasing recognition of the strategic role that LMIC-based funders can and should play in funding research for development and in strengthening local evidence. LMIC-based funders are also increasingly acting as delivery partners for official development assistance (ODA) research funding, with the goal of strengthening their capacity while increasing the efficiency and ownership of transboundary funding flows.

The motivation to focus on equity in funder-level partnerships is two-fold. Firstly, there is a paucity of information about equity at the funder level within current debates. Secondly, UKCDR intends this report to further understanding on a finding from UKCDR and ESSENCE's [Four Approaches to Supporting Equitable Research Partnerships](#), which identifies equity within funder-level partnerships as one area that could catalyse changes within the research partnership ecosystem.

“Equity is not practical. We cannot have equity when someone has money and the other doesn't.”

— HIC-based funder

This small-scale study consulted with research funding organisations based in both HICs and LMICs and found important underlying differences in how equity was understood and experienced in partnerships. While HIC-based funders saw equity as a priority for supporting development agendas within LMICs, their focus leaned toward equity at the research level rather than within funder-level partnerships.

1 By Global Research System we mean the combination of research funders, research institutions, and research policy organisations that fund, contact, and drive research agendas around the world.

For LMIC-based funders, challenges with partnership building were not framed as being about equity but seen as part of the process of building collaborations in an unequal world. This suggests equity is a systemic challenge requiring changes to all areas of the global research system¹. However, there are actions that can be taken to improve how research funders engage with each other to support a re-balancing of the global research system and drive change – see Figure 1 below.

This report has four parts. The first section, Methodology, provides an overview of the consultation process. The second section summarises the types of partnerships formed between funders and provides context on their purpose and motivation, including case study examples. The third section outlines the different views shared during the consultation on equity in funder-level partnerships. The final section provides **nine key insights** with related **areas for action** which can improve the way research funders engage with each other and contribute to change in the global research system.

Figure 1: Key Insights

Research partnership ecosystem	Recognise systemic nature of equity challenges
	De-centre coloniality to transform the research partnership ecosystem
	Equity means different things to different actors
Research relationships and systems	Strengthen research systems within LMICs
	Respect the autonomy and agendas of LMIC funders
Budget for partnership building	Value all forms of contribution to research
	Take a medium to long term approach to partnership building
Processes and procedures	Ensure funding parameters are not driven by HIC norms and policies
	Address ownership and control over research outputs at the funder-level

Part I | Methodology

This study focused on one dimension of equity in research: funder-level partnerships. Through consultation with research funders in both HICs and LMICs, we sought to understand:

1. the types of partnerships that exist between funders in the research for development landscape, including their motivation and purpose;
2. the extent to which equity was a consideration within these partnerships; and
3. lessons learned on supporting equity within funder-level relationships.

The following definitions of key concepts were used to shape this study:

Equitable partnerships: the fair and just distribution of resources, benefits, and power within partnerships. It involves addressing power imbalances, promoting inclusivity, and ensuring that all stakeholders have an equal opportunity to contribute, benefit, and influence decision-making processes (ESSENCE and UKCDR, 2022). Equity encompasses considerations of fairness, transparency, accountability, and the recognition of diverse perspectives and needs.

Funder-level partnerships: refers to collaborations and alliances between research funding institutions. These partnerships can occur between different types of funding institutions (e.g., public, private, philanthropic) in both HICs and LMICs. Funder-level partnerships aim to advance shared research interests, leverage resources (e.g., through co-funding), enhance coordination, support strategic alignment among funders, and promote collaboration, networking and knowledge sharing in the development research landscape.

Equity in funder-level partnerships: the fair and just distribution of resources, benefits, and power within collaborations and alliances between research funding institutions.

Consultation process

Recognising UKCDR's position as a collaborative of UK-based funders and acknowledging that power dynamics can shape the content and tone of discussion, the consultation was divided into two streams:

Stream one: UKCDR commissioned an independent LMIC-based research team to undertake consultation with LMIC-based funders. This was an attempt to create a safe space for LMIC-based funders to provide open and honest feedback about their experience of funder-level partnerships.

Stream two: UKCDR undertook consultation with UK- and other HIC-based funders.

Both consultation streams used semi-structured interviews (n=23) with purposively sampled key informants representing research funders (HIC-based (n=13) and LMIC-based (n=10)). The two streams of work are brought together in this report. The sample was built by leveraging the networks of the commissioned research team and UKCDR.

There are important limitations to this study:

- This study spoke to a small number of representatives of funders in HICs and LMICs (n=23). Therefore, the conclusions drawn represent only a snapshot of perspectives from research funders across HICs and LMICs.
- There was difficulty in recruiting participants for stream one. This may have limited the breadth of perspectives captured.
- The HIC/LMIC binary is imperfect and does not fully reflect the diversity of experiences and the different power dynamics that exist between organisations and people.
- Different research teams undertook the interviews with HIC- and LMIC-based funders, resulting in complementary but slightly different approaches to data collection and analysis.
- Stream one was a time-bound piece of work. This meant the research team was not extensively involved in combining the two streams of analysis but did give feedback on two versions of the combined report.
- Outsourcing stream one did not remove the underlying biases and assumptions of the research, which were driven by the priorities of UK-based international development research funders.

For more details on the sampling approach and limitations see Annex 1: Notes on methodology.

Part II | Funder-level partnerships: types, motivations, and purpose

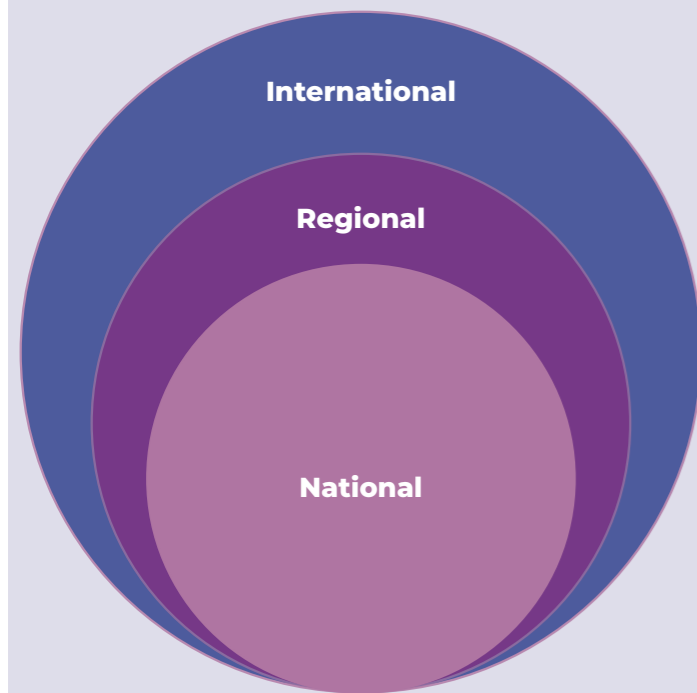
Type of funder-level partnerships

As defined in the previous section, equitable partnerships can occur between different types of funding institutions (e.g., public, private, philanthropic) in both HICs and LMICs. Therefore, this study considered funder-level partnerships through two lenses:

1. the types of partnerships that exist between funders in the research for development landscape, including their motivation and purpose;
2. the extent to which equity was a consideration within these partnerships; and
3. lessons learned on supporting equity within funder-level relationships.

Partners' locations

Figure 1: Location of partners



International: The focus of this study. This type of partnership involves one funder collaborating with another in a different country or an international funding institution. Often, LMIC-based funders engage in partnerships with HIC-based funders in Europe or North America. However, this category also includes South-South partnerships.

Regional: This type of partnership involves funding agencies operating in different countries within the same geographical region working together.

National: Most common, especially within countries with numerous local or regional funding organisations. This may involve a partnership between a research body and a government agency or ministry.

Partnership motivation and purpose

Figure 3 below illustrates the most frequently referenced motivations for international partnerships at the funder level from the interview analysis. These motivations are not mutually exclusive; partnerships are often motivated by intersecting factors which can evolve over time.

Figure 3: Motivations for funder-level partnerships

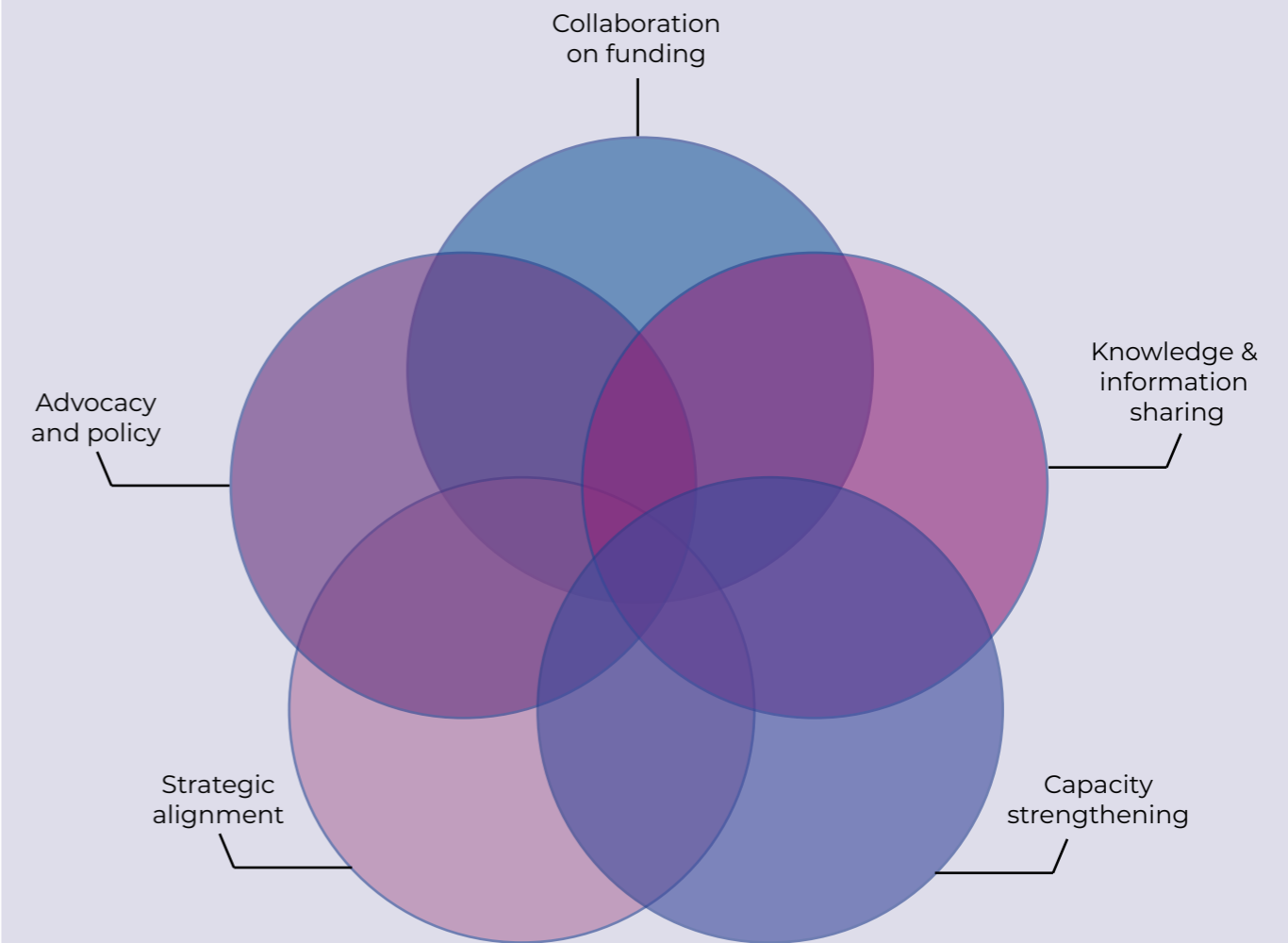


Table 1: Examples of motivations for funder-level partnerships

Motivation	Purpose and example(s)
Collaboration on funding	<p>Funders co-fund specific projects or programmes, allowing them to combine resources to achieve greater impact, and/or stimulate international research agendas. This can help in sharing risks and leveraging each funder's unique strengths and expertise. Different approaches to co-funding include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Joint funding: multiple funders contribute to a funding initiative. ■ Pooled funding: funders contribute to a common fund managed by a lead organisation to support research. ■ Sequential funding: funders provide funding at different stages of a project, supporting the whole lifecycle. <p>E.g., Belmont Forum is a joint funding partnership.</p>
Knowledge and information sharing	<p>Funders share insights, data, and best practices to enhance their respective funding strategies. This can be achieved through forming networks, specific meetings or conferences, or jointly commissioned studies or evaluations.</p> <p>E.g., Global Research Council (GRC) is a funder network for sharing best practice.</p>
Capacity strengthening	<p>Funders transfer knowledge of administrative, technical, or logistical services to strengthen capacity of peer funders in other countries and support shared learning. This could be through technical assistance, grants, training, and networking opportunities.</p> <p>E.g., Science Granting Councils Initiative (SGCI) has a strong capacity strengthening component.</p>
Strategic alignment	<p>Funders collaborate to ensure their efforts are aligned and complementary rather than duplicative. This can lead to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ More coherent support to certain research areas. ■ Coordination of goals and strategies. ■ Collectively pooling expertise and resources. <p>E.g., GloPID-R is a global coalition of research funders working to coordinate research funding for infectious diseases.</p>
Advocacy and policy	<p>Funders can join forces to advocate for policy changes or to influence public opinion on critical issues. Their combined efforts can have greater impact on global, regional, or national research agendas.</p> <p>E.g., GRC is also an example of a collective advocacy partnership.</p>

Partnership Case Studies

Case Study 1 | The Belmont Forum

Established in 2009, the [Belmont Forum](#) is a partnership of funding organisations, international science councils, and regional consortia dedicated to advancing transdisciplinary science. Guided by the [Belmont Challenge](#), a vision document promoting international transdisciplinary research to understand, mitigate, and adapt to global environmental change, the Forum fosters collaboration among its members. It achieves this by issuing international calls for proposals, committing to best practices for open data access, and providing transdisciplinary training.

Since its establishment, the Forum has successfully led 22 calls for proposals, supporting 181 projects and more than 1000 scientists and stakeholders, representing over 90 countries.

Joint call for proposals: The Belmont Forum issues joint calls for proposals on specific themes, such as climate change, biodiversity, and sustainable development. These calls are referred to as Collaborative Research Actions (CRAs). Each funder then funds the researchers who fall within its funding mandate.

Shared governance: The Belmont Forum has a shared governance model. Decisions are made collectively by member organisations, ensuring all partners have an equal voice in setting research priorities, selecting proposals, and evaluating outcomes.

Capacity strengthening and knowledge exchange: The forum emphasises the inclusion of early-career researchers and the development of skills and infrastructure in participating countries, particularly those from LMICs. It aims to provide workshops, training programmes, and mobility grants to foster knowledge exchange and enhance the capabilities of funded researchers and institutions.

Case Study 2 | The Global Research Council (GRC)

The [GRC](#) was established in 2012. It is a virtual organisation whose members include the heads of science and engineering funding agencies from around the world. The GRC aims to share information and best practice to support collaboration worldwide. The GRC is focused on advocating for the right conditions for research cooperation and collaboration to thrive in support of global challenges. Since its establishment, the Council has successfully led 22 calls for proposals, supporting 181 projects and more than 1000 scientists and stakeholders, representing over 90 countries.

Championing an equitable future: GRC members work together to support an equitable global research system that harnesses the diversity of global talent. This is supported by the development of shared Statements of Principles on research-related topics of pressing interest to members. For example, in 2022 this focused on Research Ethics, Integrity, and Culture.

Balanced governance: The governing board of the GRC includes representatives from all five world regions: three from the Americas, three from Asia-Pacific, three from Europe, one from the Middle East and North Africa, and two from Sub-Saharan Africa. Global representation is also ensured on the Executive Support Group and Global Committee.

Working groups to drive change: The GRC's working groups include themes related to equity in research funding and ensuring fair engagement between funding partners:

- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Working Group
- Responsible Research Assessment Working Group
- Multilateral Engagement Working Group

Regional meetings: These meetings provide a platform for all interested stakeholders to feed into the annual meeting of all members.

Case Study 3 | The Science Granting Councils Initiative (SGCI)

SGCI involves multiple international and regional funders who aim to strengthen the capacities of science granting councils (SGCs) across Sub-Saharan Africa through a structured and strategic approach that emphasises partnership, shared goals, and mutual benefits.

SGCI was established in 2015 through a partnership between the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and South Africa's National Research Foundation (NRF). Since then, other funders have joined to support the continued growth of SGCI, with some focusing on specific activities.

Joint funding and resource pooling: Funders jointly contribute to a central pool of resources which is then allocated by SGCI to various capacity strengthening and research initiatives.

Coordinated capacity strengthening: Funders co-sponsor training sessions and workshops tailored to the needs of SGCs, e.g., grant management, research administration, and policy analysis skills.

Peer learning: Experienced professionals from African research funders and other involved funders engage in peer learning activities, supporting mutual learning and ultimately improving systems for research funding and management.

Joint monitoring and evaluation: Funders work together to create and implement monitoring and evaluation frameworks that assess the effectiveness and impact of SGCI-supported initiatives.

Case Study 4 | GloPID-R

Established in 2013, [GloPID-R](#) is a global coalition of research funders that invest in research to improve pandemic preparedness and response. There are currently 35 members and eight observers, representing all regions of the world. The group facilitates coordination and information sharing among funders through working groups and by providing guidance and tools.

Regional hub strategy: This approach aims to help address outbreak preparedness and response challenges in a way that is unique to the needs of specific regions, as well as ensuring autonomy.

Focus on research for benefit of low-resource settings: Via working groups and data mapping, GloPID-R helps identify research priorities in low-resource settings and highlights gaps in research funding in LMICs.

Effective and equitable principles for clinical trials: GloPID-R has developed a roadmap for clinical trials coordination, which contains goals and principles to ensure coordinated, effective and equitable clinical trials in response to epidemics and pandemics.

Part III | Understanding equity in funder-level partnerships

This study found that the extent to which equity is considered and how it is defined differs across LMIC-based and HIC-based funders. For LMIC-based funders, equity is often not a major or explicit concern within one partnership; rather, it is viewed as part of systemic inequalities within the research ecosystem. LMIC-based funders tend to have realist perspectives on the unavoidable resourcing differences between HIC-based and LMIC-based institutions. On the other hand, HIC-based funders were not able to provide a definition of what equity means at the funder level, despite awareness of its importance as a topic. Most stated that they had not had explicit conversations about 'equity' in relation to other funders, because they see partnerships as being driven by the research benefits of global scientific collaboration. HIC-based funders were more able to talk about equity within the research they fund than within partnerships with other funders.

The table below provides an overview of the perspectives captured from interviews about which partner drove decision making at each stage of partnership development. This was used as a basic proxy for equity considerations in the interviews.

Table 2: Participant perspectives on areas of partnership development

Area	Participant perspectives
Initiation of partnership	LMIC-based funders reported that partnerships were often initiated by HIC-based funders, although some reported having actively started discussions. Most LMIC-based funders did not see equity as something that affects the decision or process of entering a partnership.
	<p>“ We have partnerships where they are initiated by the LMICs. We also have partnerships initiated by the HICs. — LMIC-based funder ”</p>
	HIC-based funders indicated there are certain countries (e.g. South Africa) that they are more likely to initiate partnerships with because of those countries' significant role and reputation in the funding landscape. Additionally, decisions to initiate partnerships can be politically motivated. HIC-based funders do not define funder-level equity when initiating partnerships but consider it part of ensuring LMIC-based partners maintain a role in decision making and the right balance of accountability is struck.
	<p>“ Equity helps speak to the comparative advantage and that's often what we hear from funding partners... So, I'd say [equity] might not be...explicit in the way we set up our funding partnerships. — HIC-based funder ”</p>
	<p>“ Equitable governance is a big part of our processes to help us develop partnerships and governance structures that are more equal. There are those high-level practices, [that] are actually built into the steps for partnership development. — HIC-based funder ”</p>

Area	Participant perspectives
<p>Identification of thematic or strategic priorities</p>	<p>Respondents felt priorities are subject to negotiations between LMIC-based and HIC-based partners. LMIC-based funders cited examples of HIC-based funders having imposed thematic priorities, but some emphasised that power does not operate in one direction, and examples were shared of LMIC-based funders leaving negotiations they perceived as unbalanced.</p> <p>“ Many times, it is the (LMIC-based funder), and other times there is a negotiation. It is never just the (HIC-based funder), not at all. If it is not (driven by) us, we negotiate to get closer to each other’s points of view. ” — LMIC-based funder</p> <p>HIC-based funders were committed to bringing partners together to shape priorities as part of a responsible approach to international collaboration. For HIC-based funders, identification of priorities can involve careful deliberation based on country priorities and/or diplomatic considerations.</p> <p>“ So it’s not just the big donor and the little player, it’s really about adding value and bringing in different actors that that can also advise on the strategic directions of the work. ” — HIC-based funder</p>
<p>Funds and other resources</p>	<p>Some respondents had mostly experienced co-funding partnerships. However, there was a view that this approach limited the types of partnerships LMIC-based funders could enter as they do not always have the resources to co-fund. This is especially true for Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and thus limits their access to international collaboration opportunities.</p> <p>“ To some extent, we find that resource constraints have led to limitation of modes of contribution and type of partnerships. For example, LMICs, in many cases, do not have funding to co-fund and thus become merely receivers. ” — LMIC-based funder</p> <p>In contrast, some HIC-based funders saw co-funding arrangements as the ideal case for supporting equity. Several of those interviewed felt that LMIC-based funders are more equally engaged when they also play a role in financing the partnership, although LMICs are not expected to contribute to the same extent as HIC-based funders. Others felt that partnerships were more often about sharing information and strategic alignment, in which case funding is not always required.</p> <p>“ It’s not purely a money partnership, it’s about policy and strategic direction and how we use our influence... [there are] multiple examples of where...we’ll come together to share our thinking on a particular issue or topic. ” — HIC-based funder</p>

Area	Participant perspectives
<p>Parameters of funding encompassing eligibility criteria</p>	<p>There were different experiences of how funding parameters were developed. Some LMIC-based funders had experienced HIC-based funders coming with preconceived rules, and LMIC-based partners negotiating based on their position. Whereas others felt this was done through mutual agreement, with LMIC-based funders determining the parameters that worked for the context and projects covered by the partnership.</p> <p>“ This is done by mutual understanding. There is a mutual agreement... [we] usually take into account what the partner thinks and is willing to do, but the decision is taken by both partners. ” — LMIC-based funder</p> <p>HIC-based funders interviewed mentioned Memorandums of Understandings (MoUs) as the means through which standard procedures are tailored to specific partnerships. MoUs might include decision-making processes, defining the format for funding, and how proposals will be evaluated.</p>
<p>Evaluation of partnership and output</p>	<p>Some respondents had mostly experienced co-funding partnerships. However, there was a view that this approach limited the types of partnerships LMIC-based funders could enter as they do not always have the resources to co-fund. This is especially true for Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and thus limits their access to international collaboration opportunities.</p> <p>“ The onus rests on those who are implementing the project to carry out the evaluation of their projects. ” — LMIC-based funder</p> <p>Several HIC-based funders referenced a general assembly structure or governing council, which made strategic decisions on a funding initiative. Equity is a consideration for deciding who sits on such mechanisms, while some HIC-based funders use advisory boards of LMIC-based stakeholders to inform decision making. HIC-based funders were keen to learn what others were doing in this space to support equitable decision making.</p> <p>“ We are trying to do a review of what other funders are doing...that’s looking to see what the state of play is and where we can reflect better and with more context on how our own practices are in comparison to other funders. ” — HIC-based funder</p>

Part IV | Equity at funder level: key insights and areas for action

Our findings show that equity at the funder level is not the primary equity challenge for most research funders, especially those in LMICs. Rather they see equity as a systemic challenge requiring changes to all areas of the global research system. However, our analysis does identify actions that can be taken to improve the way research funders engage with each other to support a re-balancing of the global research system and drive systemic change. Below, these insights and areas for action are mapped onto UKCDR and ESSENCE's Four Approaches to Supporting Equitable Research Partnerships.

Approach 1: Support the Research Partnership Ecosystem

1. Recognise the systemic nature of equity challenges

Funder-level equity is only one lever for change and may not be the most important one. LMIC-based funders highlighted that equity challenges in global collaboration extend beyond individual funder-level partnerships and are deeply rooted in systemic issues as the playing field is inherently unequal. These structural inequities, such as historical power imbalances and unequal access to resources, persist across global research collaborations. They intersect with factors such as geography, socio-economic status, and institutional capacities, influencing participation and outcomes. Some LMIC-based funders perceive asymmetries in negotiations as unchangeable, despite their placing value on equity. Understanding these systemic challenges highlights the need for structural changes and collective action across the research ecosystem.

Areas for action

- Expand and diversify sources of funding within LMICs.
- Expand funder-level partnerships and sources of funding for research to LDCs.
- Make use of regional research intermediaries to create safe spaces for equity discussions.
- Put in place accountability processes so LMIC-based actors can hold their partners to account on the guidelines and principles of equity to which they subscribe.

2. De-centre coloniality to transform the research partnership ecosystem

The movement to decolonise research and promote equity in setting research agendas (Fransman et al., 2021; Alba et al., 2020) applies equally to funder-level partnerships as to collaborations between researchers. This requires understanding the legacy of colonialism and its impact on current global inequities, which are mirrored within the global research ecosystem.

Areas for action

- Provide mechanisms for LMIC-based stakeholders to alert HIC-based funders both to the research priorities and to the practical obstacles they encounter in funding and conducting research (UKCDR and ESSENCE, 2022), to support LMIC-led agenda setting.
- Undertake critical self-reflection to understand the legacy of colonialism and its impact on current power and resource imbalances within the global research system. This self-reflection should drive actions for how HIC-based funders engage with LMIC-based partners.

3. Equity means different things to different actors

Definitions and achievement criteria of equity will differ based on the partners involved and the differences in resources and power they hold. Our findings show that equity is not the main consideration of either HIC-based or LMIC-based funders when building partnerships with each other, but for different reasons. Moreover, there are differences in how equity is defined and discussed. Only a few LMIC-based respondents have engaged in equity discussions directly with their partners and some perceive asymmetries in negotiations as unchangeable, despite placing value on equity. Conversely, for HIC-based funders, conversations about equity tend to focus on relationships between researchers and research institutions, rather than funders.

Areas for action

- Refer to the definition of equitable partnerships around fair and just distribution of resources, benefits, and power, but also be open to more specific definitions of what constitutes an equitable and mutually beneficial relationship.
- Establish intentional safe spaces for equity discussions where all partners can openly discuss equity concerns and share experiences. Such open discussions would foster a culture of transparency and mutual respect among partners.
- Use legislations and codes promoted through global research agencies, e.g., GRC, which can promote equity among all members. This would set a global standard for how funders engage with each other regardless of their geographic location.

Approach 2: Strengthen Research Relationships and Research Systems

4. Strengthen systems for doing and managing research

LMIC-based funders see resource imbalances as a challenge to achieving equity in funder-level partnerships. HIC-based funders often bring more funds to partnerships, and this is often the reason for working together as the partnership brings access to human resources and technology. Many respondents perceive this exchange

as extremely valuable despite the impact that imbalance in resources has on the perception and practice of equity. For some countries with less established research systems the struggle is a lack of access to international collaborations altogether, which perpetuates low capacity, weak infrastructure, and isolation of the research community. HIC-based funders must recognise their own knowledge gaps and what they can learn from their LMIC-based partners to support two-way learning. Prioritising capacity strengthening ensures that LMICs have the skills, networks, resources and infrastructure necessary to participate effectively and assertively in international research collaborations, overcoming some of the systemic barriers to equity.

“To some extent, we find that resource constraints have led to limitation of modes of contribution and type of partnerships. For example, LMICs, in many cases, do not have funding to co-fund and thus become merely receivers.”
— LMIC-based funder

Areas for action

- Support long-term capacity strengthening for both undertaking and managing research beyond specific research projects (see UKCDR, 2022). This is especially relevant for LDCs, which usually have less access to international collaborations.
- Ensure capacity strengthening efforts support two-way learning and knowledge exchange between HIC-based and LMIC-based funders, institutions, and researchers.
- Make use of coalition networks of LMIC-based funding agencies, which can amplify their collective voice and advocate for their interests, act as a platform for sharing resources, and enhance their decision-making power in the global research funding landscape.

5. Respect autonomy and agendas of LMIC-based funders

Some LMIC-based funders have decided to reject partnership offers due to disagreements about research priorities. A balance is needed between global scientific objectives and local development needs, but LMIC-based funders must be able to walk away from partnerships that do not serve their interests.

Areas for action

- Involve all partners early in the planning process to support inclusive agenda setting as this can prevent misalignments. Collaborative development of research agendas ensures that the interests and priorities of all parties are represented and respected.
- Understand and respect the national mandates of LMIC-based funders. Most LMIC-based funders, typically national research councils, are driven by their national development goals and locally crafted development plans. Partnerships should be designed to support these national goals to ensure relevance and local impact.

Approach 3: Budget for Partnership Building

6. Take a medium to long-term approach to partnership building

The sustainability of partnerships between research funders over the medium to long term is key to ensuring equity. Time and space are needed to develop equitable ways of working and for shared priorities to evolve. Short-term approaches limit the ability for mutual learning and capacity strengthening within partner institutions and disrupt the potential impact of funded research.

Areas for action

- All funders should commit to partnerships for the medium to long term to avoid their efforts at funding research or strengthening capacity being wasted.
- Recognise the role for regional research intermediaries who can build long-term networks and relationships, as they can navigate regional contexts and translate global equity norms into relevant context-specific actions.

“We are seeing more and more short-term projects, one year and even shorter. I think it is very important to consider sustaining projects instead of swinging back and forth...because I believe this disrupts work and affects established capacity...When funding is lost, the work done over many years...of investment, deteriorates, degrades, and dissipates...I think it is important...to focus on more sustainable and enduring projects in the medium term, rather than being so short-term or tied to very immediate results.”
— LMIC-based funder

7. Value all forms of contribution to research

Some HIC-based funders interviewed suggested that partnerships can only be equitable when all partners are providing financial resources. However, this would limit the countries with which they engage, and potentially prevent partnerships from being undertaken with research funding institutions in LDCs, where support is most needed. Recognising that every partner brings useful, even if in-kind, contributions to a partnership will foster equity.

Areas for action

- Value the contributions all partners bring, including those that are not financial. The value of deep contextual knowledge, which is essential for the success of the partnership and funded research, needs to be amplified. Valuing all contributions, regardless of their nature, builds mutual respect and collaboration.
- Empower LMIC-based partners to leverage their local insights and valuable in-kind contributions during negotiations. This can balance power dynamics and enhance their influence in decision making.

“We must be able in our funding agreements and negotiations to say and quantify what it means to partner with somebody who brings in-kind contributions to the project. In other words, here is a project being undertaken in an LMIC, and an HIC is paying for everything, but without the context and without the people who understand the context who can do the research, we cannot actually fulfil what we need to fulfil. The moment that we can acknowledge and quantify such in-kind contributions properly, then I think we can tie the head around this question of equitable partnerships.”

— LMIC-based funder

Approach 4: Implement Processes and Procedures that Sustain Partnerships

8. Ensure funding parameters are not driven by HIC norms and policies

An important element of equity in funder-level partnerships is the decision on funding parameters. This includes aspects such as which researchers and teams can apply for funding and how they are selected, as well as disbursement and duration of funding, among others. As decisions on these funding parameters can involve difficult negotiations between HIC-based and LMIC-based partners, flexibility is key.

Areas for action

- Develop clear terms of reference from the outset of partnerships that recognise the interests of all parties and provide a framework for future decision making. Alignment at the start on objectives and ways of working supports equity and maximises partnership success.
- Ensure negotiations on funding parameters are not driven by the assumption that the agendas and frameworks of HIC-based funders represent the gold standard.

9. Address ownership and control over research outputs at the funder level

LMIC-based and HIC-based funders often do not have the same ownership and control over research results, this can include scientific discoveries, technology, publications, datasets, and facilities. Addressing ownership of research outputs at the funder level provides a framework for equitable benefits across the research system.

Areas for action

- Take cognisance of the imbalance of control and ownership over research outputs in partnership arrangements and make explicit provisions to overcome this.
- Develop strategies to address imbalances in ownership of research outputs. Examples include funding for open access fees, creating shared repositories, and ensuring all partners have the necessary resources to access and use the results.

Conclusion

This study has examined equity in funder-level partnerships, with a focus on relationships between HIC-based and LMIC-based research funding organisations. The key insight is the limited usefulness of focusing on just one part of the partnership system, equity between funders, when equity challenges are systemic.

Through analysis of semi-structured interviews with 23 representatives of funders in HICs and LMICs, we found that for LMIC-based funders, equity within funder-level relationships was not an explicit concern, rather partnerships were shaped by the challenges of inter-institutional collaboration in an unequal world. For HIC-based funders, equity was a priority for supporting international development agendas within LMICs, however they tended to be more interested in equity at the research level.

Although implementing equity at the funder level can be a part of addressing equity in the overall global research ecosystem, it is not the primary equity challenge for most research funders, especially those in LMICs. This suggests that change cannot be addressed within individual funder-level partnerships but rather requires efforts across different parts of the research system.

Nonetheless, it is important to note the limited scale of this study and understand the findings as only a snapshot of perspectives, especially given the difficulty in recruiting participants from LMICs. This study has identified 9 key insights with related areas for action, which can improve the way research funders engage with each other and go some way to supporting a re-balancing of the global research system and driving systemic change.

Annex 1: Note on methodology

Oversight of this work was provided by an Expert Group consisting of stakeholders from the UK, LMICs, and other HICs, including research funders, policy makers, and partnership specialists. This group provided technical input, supported consultation with funders, and reviewed the findings.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used because there is not a complete mapping of research funding organisations globally, especially those in LMICs (Egbetokun et al., 2020) from which to select respondents. Additionally, it was important that the sample contained organisations with experience of forming partnerships with institutions in other countries. The regional breakdown of the interviews is shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Interviews conducted by region

Region	Stream 1: LMICs	Stream 2: HICs	Grand Total
Africa	5		5
Asia	2	1	3
Europe		10*	10
Latin America	3		3
North America		2	2
Grand Total	10	13	23

* 3 out of the 10 European interviews were with UK research funders

Consultation process

All interviews were conducted using Zoom or Microsoft Teams using a semi-structured guide based on the consultation questions. The findings emerged from a narrative and thematic analysis of the interview transcripts combined with first-hand contextual knowledge of the research team for both consultation streams.

Limitations

- This study spoke to a small number of representatives of funders in HICs and LMICs (n=23). Therefore, the conclusions drawn represent just a snapshot of perspectives across research funders in HICs and LMICs.
- The diversity of the research funding landscape in LMICs is not well mapped, which made it hard to recruit participants for stream one. The independent consultants used their own knowledge alongside UKCDR's networks to identify participants. This may have limited the breadth of perspectives included within this stream but also could reflect the lower priority this topic has for LMIC-based funders.
- The HIC/LMIC division is an imperfect binary that does not reflect the diversity of experiences of different contexts and the different power dynamics that exist between organisations and people. However, it was necessary to attempt to provide a more inclusive space for LMIC-based respondents and the two-stream approach was the imperfect solution to this challenge.
- The two-stream approach meant different research teams undertook the interviews with HIC-based and LMIC-based funders. Although we believed this was the best approach to take given the difficulty of a UK research team creating a safe space for LMIC-based funders to contribute their views, it meant there were complimentary but slightly different approaches to both data collection and analysis across the two streams. If time and resources had allowed sense-checking by each research team of the other team's analysis, this would have strengthened the findings.
- The process by which the two streams of consultation were combined is a further limitation. Stream one was a time-bound piece of work which meant that the research team involved was not able to be extensively involved in combining the two streams of analysis, although they were able to sense-check the UKCDR team's representation of their work by offering feedback on two versions of the combined report.
- Although outsourcing the LMIC consultation to an LMIC-led organisation created some distance between the UK focus of this work, it did not remove the underlying biases and assumptions of the research, which were driven by UK international development research funder priorities, as the main audience for UKCDR's work.

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