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Towards framing the global in global development: Prospects for development geography

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This paper examines data in the public sphere on the global scope of geography's UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) projects. Building on decolonial critiques of development research, I argue that geography should frame "the global" of global research as a sphere of ethical choices in research design and practice. The distribution of funded projects in the UKRI Gateway data suggests geographers succeed where they extend on the more worthy aspects of the discipline's Area Studies legacy. The discipline's engagements with early career researchers, international colleagues, and the development sector, however, have potentially been reshaped by the GCRF and thus need closer examination. While the UK government has brought the GCRF programme to a close, further work on these themes should inform the next iteration of global research. The ethical choices that make research global will remain fundamental to equitable design and impact in global development projects, thus scholars in development geography should prepare to make their projects more transparent and accountable.

KEYWORDS
area studies, collaboration, decolonial, development geography, Global Challenges Research Fund, global research

1 | INTRODUCTION: FRAMING THE GLOBAL

Development research has increasingly become structured around a set of global challenges that academics are asked to address through equitable international collaborations. This shift to global, challenge-led research could have acknowledged the unevenness of development and better shared responsibility for it (Mawdsley, 2017). However, the same shift could also have reinvigorated old assumptions that the global North could offer the necessary technical expertise to address the problems of the global South. In the UK, one such funding scheme, the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), allocated £1.5 billion to development research between 2016 and 2021.[1] The GCRF was intended to "support cutting-edge research that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries," bringing the "strengths of the UK" to global development challenges and producing "excellent research" (Newman et al., 2019, p. 22).[2] When the GCRF was announced in 2015, its six goals were to: (1) seek to investigate a specific problem or seek a specific outcome that will have an impact on a developing country or countries; (2) provide evidence as to why this is a problem for the developing country or countries; (3) address the issue identified effectively and efficiently; (4) use the strengths of the UK to address the issue, working in collaboration with others as appropriate; (5) demonstrate that the research is of an internationally excellent standard;

and (6) identify appropriate pathways to impact to ensure that the developing country benefits from the research.[3] Where the goals of excellence, collaboration, and impact were not completely in alignment, little guidance was offered on how to prioritise them. Thus, the GCRF potentially placed attaining excellence in tension with effective collaboration and research impact in the delivery of development assistance.

The new GCRF funding stream further augmented what was already a race for global research partnerships (Noxolo, 2017b, p. 343). Here, minority world academics, some entirely new to work in developing-country contexts, sought out majority world collaborators. The longer-term impacts of the transformations entailed by challenge-led global research are only now emerging. Scholars argue that the GCRF may both have generated effective collaborations and enhanced pre-existing unevenness through poorly considered or unbalanced efforts that effectively re-inscribed colonial forms of research relations (Noxolo, 2017a) familiar to scholars from the global South as research "extractivism." The consensus among observers is that global research is not only a matter of demonstrating global scope or scale. Global research should also incorporate considerations of inclusivity, equitable collaboration, career development, and impact into its framing as a global project (Newman et al., 2019; Noxolo, 2017a).

The GCRF scheme was brought to a close in 2021 by cuts to the UK's Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) budget.[4] Amid the debacle of projects and calls cancelled (Academy of Social Sciences, 2021), and active projects being "re-profiled" in ways yet to be determined, further analysis is needed. Geography needs to come to grips with what the global of global research has meant and should mean in practice.

Here, I initiate this discussion by providing an overview of the publicly available information on geography-related GCRF projects from the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Gateway. While the Gateway offers limited insight, the literature and commentary on the GCRF and GCRF projects reveal important gaps in data on project design and outcomes and suggest how future schemes to support global research could be made more transparent and accountable. We lack assessment of the impacts of the GCRF on collaborative relationships and early career researcher careers, as well as a discursive analysis of GCRF calls and associated documentation as they shaped project design and team composition. Analysis of the GCRF's impacts on the discipline will be crucial for UK geographers, international colleagues, and research partners to understand how it reshaped development research agendas and to anticipate, and possibly mitigate, issues that may persist into the next iteration of global research.

2 | THE GCRF

The UK government launched the GCRF in November 2015 as "Tackling global challenges in the national interest" (HM Government, 2015). With £1.5 billion allocated over five years, the GCRF focused on ambitious, challenge-led disciplinary and interdisciplinary research. Administered by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), the GCRF was part of the UK's commitment to spend 0.7% of gross national income on ODA,[5] directing aid through academic research in GCRF challenge areas.[6] These challenges were: (1) affordable, reliable, and sustainable energy; (2) clean air, water, and sanitation; (3) inclusive and equitable quality education; (4) reduce conflict and promote peace, justice, and humanitarian action; (5) reduce poverty and inequality, including gender inequalities; (6) resilience and action on short-term environmental shocks and long-term environmental change; (7) secure and resilient food systems supported by sustainable marine resources and agriculture; (8) sustainable cities and communities; (9) sustainable health and well-being; (10) sustainable livelihoods supported by strong foundations for inclusive growth and innovation; and (11) understand and respond effectively to forced displacement and multiple refugee crises.

The GCRF funded development research outside the (former) Department for International Development (DfID, now FCDO – the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office). Manji and Mandler (2019) argue that the GCRF aimed to make the UK's ODA more transparent while delivering both value for money and ongoing partnerships between UK academics and scholars in the global South. The GCRF was also intended to sustain UK university research when other government research funding streams were in decline and to help to address growing public scepticism over foreign aid (Heinrich et al., 2015). Together, these ambitious expectations, with their inherent contradictions, were possibly too heavy a burden for one funding programme.

Global Challenges Research Fund projects typically featured large academic teams spread across multiple countries and disciplines (Callard & Fitzgerald, 2015; Datta, 2018), incorporating government, industry, and civil society partners. GCRF calls for proposals created inclusions and exclusions that shaped the scope and scale of such research activities. Some calls specified projects in three or more countries, while others focused on regions, though without guidance defining "region" itself. A proportion of GCRF calls nonetheless accepted single-country projects fitting within the call's overarching theme.

Thus, though global research may be supra-national in import and/or multi-national in scope, in practice the GCRF's global was often assembled within one nation or by adding together selected nation-states.

Overseas Development Assistance compliance defined research as GCRF-eligible. Each GCRF project was required, as its primary objective, to promote the welfare and economic development of people in "developing countries," defined by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) through its Development Assistance Committee (DAC) List of ODA recipients (OECD, 2019). This list of aid-eligible lower and lower-middle income countries is what most evidently framed the GCRF's "global."[7] If a country had "graduated" from the DAC List, it became ineligible for GCRF-funded projects, despite inequalities or ethnic exclusions within that country.

The GCRF funded interdisciplinary research. UKRI initially published an interactive GCRF map[8] listing funded projects by country and funding council.[9] Here, the "home" discipline for each project's principal investigator was not reported. While there is no overwhelming evidence that previous academic research on development was mono-disciplinary (*pace* Conway & Waage, 2010), the GCRF strongly encouraged research design that blurred disciplinary boundaries. The GCRF thus framed the global as a space where disciplines no longer set the benchmark for the research excellence it sought. This framing ran counter to established UK disciplinary norms for research excellence. The most prominent example is the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) assessment exercise, for which, in its 2021 iteration, a new structure of inter-disciplinary advisers was established.[10] The contradiction between interdisciplinarity and more familiar (disciplinary) measures of "excellence" was thus constitutive of the GCRF, shaping not only the GCRF's impacts and outcomes but the ways global research was being structured and conducted by UK academics.

2.1 | Funded projects

Initially, UKRI published GCRF awards data separately. After April 2018, it included awards data in the UKRI Gateway.[11] As of late 2019, the Gateway reported on 95,250 projects, searchable by investigators' ORCID ID, project abstract, project reference, and project title, as well as classification. Each project carries up to four or five classifications, including "GCRF." On the Gateway database, 2,153 funded projects had a classification of "GCRF."[12] Of 2,153 GCRF projects, 196 also carried a classification falling under the broad umbrella of geography.[13] I reviewed the Gateway project summaries for each of these 196 GCRF grants. By triangulating the principal investigator's name and academic affiliation with their current public web profile, I identified those projects where the principal investigator's home department or school title included Geography and/or their web-published academic biography showed a higher degree in Geography.[14] There were 50 projects awarded in this sub-set, with awards made to 48 individuals named as principal investigators who had Geography affiliations or degrees, as shown in Figure 1.

The largest number of successful projects led by geographers investigated the GCRF challenge area(s) within a single country. Somewhat fewer projects were awarded to regional networks and only a few projects were awarded for research designed to explore the challenge theme(s) in three or more countries.[15] Thus, where geographers were successful in
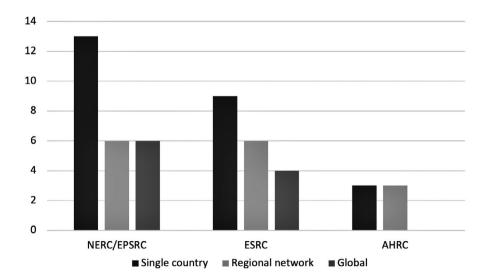

FIGURE 1 GCRF-funded projects for 48 geographer principal investigators and 50 projects by UKRI Research Council 2016–2018.

securing GCRF funding, it appears they delivered excellent global research design predominantly at the single-country or regional scale.

It is unclear if geographers were resisting multi-country "global" research design or unsuccessful in bidding for it. While this distribution of awards appears to broadly reflect the relative distribution of GCRF funds across UKRI's component councils, more analysis against the archive of calls for proposals would be needed to evaluate comparative success rates. What is evident is that geographers have not been dissuaded from trying to grasp how the global emerges from local and national particularities that require deep contextual knowledges. The diversity in size, scope, and composition of funded projects indicates that, just as there is no one object of global study, there is no single unit of analysis that is appropriate for investigating the articulation between studies framed at one scale and those exploring another (Amelina et al., 2012, in Kahn, 2014, p. 7).

I reviewed the project summaries for each of these 50 projects, examining team composition, named project partners, and narrative summaries. The information held on the Gateway is highly uneven, a likely artefact of changing requirements over the scheme's operation, so the outcome was inconclusive. I was often unable to reconcile data in the project summary with the principal investigator's current web profile or project website, where one had been built. Project summaries and classifications did suggest the GCRF was drawing a much broader cohort of people into doing "development geography," broadly conceived, possibly by collaborating with geographers (146 of 196 awards). These colleagues could be geographers in the global South who were co-investigators. Or they might be UK colleagues who were "geographers beyond geography" and thus chose a classification that did not necessarily match their degree(s) or academic appointment(s). The GCRF co-investigators may have been similarly questioning the global significance of single-country studies, the comparative methodology shaping projects combining countries across multiple and disparate regions, and the selection criteria for case studies within their overarching GCRF design. They, too, should be engaged in a discussion of the shape of the global in global development research and the social and ethical aspects of research design and collaborative relationships. However, the publicly available data do not offer much insight into collaborative ethics. UKRI's information architecture is not particularly transparent, nor is it always easy to see research accountability to global partners being demonstrated. Questions of accountability in global research design and making visible the delivery of inclusive, impactful, equitable, and career-building projects across global partnerships thus require further work.

3 | TRANSFORMING RESEARCH ECOLOGIES

The GCRF's impact extended well beyond what was funded. The "scramble for the South" (Noxolo, 2017b) the GCRF helped to initiate did not necessarily challenge "lopsided" geographies of knowledge production (Walker & Frimpong Boamah, 2017). The GCRF appeared during a period of rapid change in UK Higher Education when the sector was shifting from a more inclusive research culture supported by Quality-Related (QR) funds to focus on research excellence as acknowledged by competitive grant awards. The GCRF emphasised large networks and big hubs that coordinated and funded ambitious research agendas and made relatively little support available to sole investigators or early career researchers for independent projects. Unsurprisingly, then, the literature on the GCRF highlights concerns over collaborative relationships and career-stage equity.

It is not clear how effective this new research ecology has been in supporting junior researchers or small teams to secure funding to establish expertise, expand the networks initiated, then build successively bigger projects (Thompson, 2020). Accessibility by career stage has been addressed, in part, with GCRF Fellowships, but these were few and far between. Project summaries suggest early career researchers were most often involved as co-investigators or postdoctoral research assistants on GCRF projects. Some GCRF projects looked to rely on nationals from DAC List countries or their wider regions employed by UK universities in these roles. While it is possible that a sensitive project design can offer early career researchers career-building resources and some security of employment, concerns over impact delivery could also have entangled UK-based scholars with origins in the global South or capacities to work there in complex ethical issues around partnerships, impact, and dissemination strategies. The GCRF may have set early career researchers' career aspirations against their ethical obligations to attempt to decolonise the space of research partnership or to deliver public engagement benefits. That co-investigators and postdoctoral research assistants were typically more junior academics with family and care responsibilities could make the international travel and flexible working hours required by the GCRF an additional burden.

Scale of projects was a key issue. Comparatively little GCRF funding was available for smaller-scale work (Nolte, 2019). Some GCRF funds were instead made available to support these activities through university-managed QR awards, complementing the Newton Fund's "pump-priming" funding. The number of scholars who successfully developed internally

funded bids into larger GCRF projects is unknown. Themes and scale of initiatives sought varied widely between GCRF calls and university internal priority areas. Thus, it may have been difficult for scholars, even those who were well-networked and had secured competitive internal university pilot funds, to successfully develop the much larger network or regional bids GCRF calls often sought.

Lacking a clear bid-development pathway then made equitable collaboration with international colleagues difficult. This was seen in previous rounds of challenge-led funding that tended to produce uneven partnerships with colleagues in the global South. Noxolo claims the GCRF produces the "same old colonial processes" (2017a, p. 344). Kraftl et al. (2018) suggest the GCRF may nonetheless have offered openings for decolonial work. For example, the GCRF could potentially have enabled minority world geographers to support majority world colleagues to publish in venues that redress the balance of authorship, decolonising academic knowledge. The push for impact, large-scale complex projects, widespread metricisation, and the intensification of research management for "excellence," however, could have muted the potential Kraftl et al. (2018) identify.

Evidence for decolonial scholarship in the 50 Geography-led GCRF projects is scant, and examples of co-authored work were few. Of note were Antonio Ioris's (2019) *Geoforum* paper co-authored with Benites of the Kaiowa-Guarani and Goettert of the Federal University of Great Dourados, Brazil, and Douglas Quincey et al.'s (2018) paper in *WIREs Water* co-authored with Nepalese colleagues, Bishnu Pariyar and Gehendra Gurung, from the non-governmental organisation (NGO), Practical Action. However, it is questionable to what extent publishing in English-language, "internationally excellent" journals (thus meeting GCRF goal 5, above), where the UK-based academic is first author, truly decolonises research design or practices. Co-investigators in the global South may have worked closely with NGO or government partners who were unlikely to benefit from publication in academic journals. Maintaining impact-delivery relationships could have limited their ability to publish in national academic venues or other impact- and career-building channels more appropriate to their own career goals.

The GCRF could have better demonstrated how projects defined and met the collaborative needs of majority world colleagues. Academics from the global South could have found themselves overburdened if the project design required them to deliver the public engagement and impact strategies in-country. They may have been handling the logistics of networking with ODA providers in-country, setting up workshops, generating resources, and managing social media feeds, while prioritising papers for journals published in their home country and in their national language(s). Delivering impact from Open Access (OA) working papers, blog posts, social media posts, and popular press items targeted to development practitioners, and local and national policy-makers could have given them little scope to simultaneously publish in English-language or global North-based journals. Academics here may not even have been interested in or rewarded for second-authoring "excellent" collaborative publications. While in the UK and elsewhere there is a widely held assumption that global journal rankings identify the highest status and most impactful publications (Kraftl et al., 2018, p. 436), this is not universal. Across the global South, universities are increasingly "externalising" their own metrics (Jazeel, 2017) to take into account these rankings, but the process has been uneven. Indeed, this aspect of the emergent global knowledge ecology itself may have been unfamiliar to GCRF collaborators.

4 | BUILDING BIDS

The GCRF funds made available via UK universities were intended to incubate further global research through competitive internal awards. This QR support for research networking and collaboration with potential overseas partners was allocated with the goal of building future GCRF bids. Activating Western privilege (Griffiths, 2017) in relationships with potential collaborators and partners, the possibilities of the GCRF let UK academics dangle pots of money that would transform research at majority world institutions, opening up wider research horizons. Thus, to fully grasp the impacts of the GCRF, we need to also consider unsuccessful bids and those that faltered and remained unsubmitted. Funded projects are only the tip of a much larger GCRF iceberg, one on which no data were available. We can, however, suggest what these effects may have been, at least tentatively, from experiences in other disciplines and anecdotal reports.

GCRF bid-building and project delivery often depended on overseas colleagues' mobility and ability to enter the UK. GCRF-funded UK-based networking meetings, workshops, seminars, writing retreats, and training events had international participants' visas refused by the Home Office. Geographer Elena Fiddian-Qasimyeh (UCL) joined colleagues Alison Phipps (Education, Glasgow) and Insa Nolte (African Studies, Birmingham) to condemn the Home Office approach to GCRF-funded academic visitors in the UK media (Hill, 2019). Being unable to host colleagues from the global South in the UK, but nonetheless expecting to be hosted in their home countries, undermined the reciprocity and relationship-building on which successful collaborations depend.

The GCRF was intended to support established collaborations and build new and emerging ones, but UK academics faced institutional pressure to bid often and bid big. Short bid timelines from call to close meant expediency typically saw UK-based expertise driving research design. Increasingly complex requirements to evidence financial commitments from third sector and industry partners meant much work was involved. Vital bid-building activities were often only able to be undertaken by international collaborators, *gratis* and after hours. While demands placed on would-be academic partners remain difficult to quantify, colleagues in the global South complained about urgent requests to sign on as project partner, secure local NGO participation, and agree to a UK-led research design with little input (Nolte, 2019).

Furthermore, the demands of GCRF impact partnerships were innovative and unfamiliar, and the bids were reviewed by global panels. Here, issues around reviewers' expertise identified for standard grant bids reappeared (Jerrim, 2019). Reviewers could fail to engage thoroughly with complex call-based specifications for design. For example, when they mistook network bids for standard projects, they may have discounted them for lacking an explicit and well-developed project methodology. Reviewers could also be dismissive of the expertise of colleagues from the global South. UKRI's Je-S system enables international co-investigators to view reviewers' comments. Anonymous comments suggesting "more expertise in [field] is required" discouraged and humiliated colleagues. Confusion over the role of non-academic partners could compound their experience of alienation. GCRF reviewers may have assumed academics can do the research design, implementation, and delivery single-handed, with partnerships with NGOs and civil society groups being added extras for impact, rather than fundamental to an engaged and impactful research process. In a recent review of a (failed) project bid I designed around ongoing work by four NGOs across three countries, one review observed: "It's good that NGOs are included." My co-investigators in the global South were disheartened to see their precious NGO partnerships treated like an optional extra. Where colleagues have minimal research time and lack a university scaffolding of support staff and access to infrastructure and travel budgets, NGO partners can be central to research delivery.

Academic research in the global South does not operate through universities alone. It is widely recognised in the development sector that vital expertise and data on community networks and field sites belongs to third-sector organisations and government agencies (Newman et al., 2019). Academics seeking partners here must demonstrate how their proposed research will enhance ongoing development work, showing how, where, why, and crucially, with whom they work. In practice, the GCRF's design enabled academics unfamiliar with development to neglect the expertise and activity in the development sector itself. This then meant some sector leaders dismissed GCRF projects and approaches as too often failing to deliver meaningful development impacts (Newman et al., 2019).

The development sector was highly critical of the GCRF and this critique may have contributed to its demise. Newman et al. (2019) report development practitioners thought the GCRF focused too much on the individual UK-based academic principal investigator and too little on the wider, practice-based development approaches being deployed in DAC List countries. Practitioners argue a truly "global" research agenda must have a profound and long-term understanding of the interventions already in play, the people already involved, and the processes that produce change. Long-term relationships and career-long commitments (Cupples, 2019) have usually predicted global development research's success. However, because GCRF bids mobilised personal relationships as well as scholarly networks, grounding bids in affective work (Cupples, 2019; Newman et al., 2019), exclusions could have arisen. Newman et al. ask "who is included [in GCRF bids], and are they the best placed to understand and respond to the development challenges in question, or are they involved because they are relatively easy to reach and well connected?" (2019, p. 29). Under pressure, academics may have tended to stick with who they knew, privileging their existing networks and colleagues' previous connections, and potentially not located all the relevant national, regional, and sectoral third-sector development actors who saw themselves as "stakeholders" for their project area.

While prioritising personal connections over professional expertise may have met tight bid-writing timelines and benefited GCRF project functioning (Datta, 2018), it may also have impacted research design, inclusivity, and expertise in ways that undermined project success and the move to decolonise research more broadly. Moreover, the academic infrastructure that previously fostered such personal ties through communities of practice framed by concerns of region and nation – the Area Studies associations – appears to have declined with the rise of the GCRF.

4.1 | From Area Studies to global research

Area Studies has long engaged geographers exploring the deep-context features of international research. It offers transdisciplinary conversations with other scholars studying the same country or region. The Royal Geographical Society's Development Geographies Research Group has historically had a membership that crossed over with the British Academy Learned Societies regional associations: the African Studies Association (UK), the Society for Latin American Studies,

British Association for South Asian Studies, the Association of Southeast Asian Studies (UK), and the Society for Caribbean Studies. While Area Studies associations have evident colonial antecedents, they have also been a key space for efforts to decolonise research and have produced a trenchant critique of the GCRF (Nolte, 2019). Geographers seeking to build the personal relationships for potential GCRF collaborations would likely have met far more colleagues from countries on the DAC List at Area Studies meetings (Nolte, 2019) than at the Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers annual conference (Esson et al., 2017).

Past Chair of the African Studies Association, Insa Nolte (2019), argues that, despite the enduring legacies of colonial power, including the power to represent and to exclude the others being studied, Area Studies associations have been rapidly shifting towards a more equitable footing. Unfortunately, just as Area Studies efforts to decolonise really took hold, the British Academy quietly defunded the Learned Societies.[16] Seemingly out of step with contemporary internationalised universities and dominated by scholars from the humanities and social sciences, Area Studies may have appeared a poor fit to the 11 challenge areas of the GCRF. But the decline of these Learned Societies – most now functioning as charities or supported by paid-access journals threatened by Open Access requirements – has diminished the diversity of interdisciplinary spaces where scholars of regions or nations can gather. Ironically, Area Studies, now increasingly driven by the concerns of scholars originating in regions or nations of interest and studying the specificities of the global shaping the daily lives of people living within them (Nolte, 2019), has been superseded by an often-ahistorical and potentially neo-colonial framing of "the global" (Kahn, 2014).

In African Studies, for example, undoing the distinctions of colonising researcher and colonised research object and/or assistant had been the focus of years of work. Nolte (2019) outlines how the African Studies Association (UK) had initiated a joint publication series, Africa-based workshops, funding for Africa-based scholars to study the impacts of UK institutions and migrants on their home nations, and held conferences in Africa. When the GCRF appeared, things moved backwards. African scholars were invited to join bids, but only to generate and collect data that would be analysed by UK-based project leads. Short deadlines offered them little scope for design input and the primary benefit for them was to be co-authoring in "high-impact" international journals. Nolte's interviewees, senior Africa-based colleagues, directors of their own research institutes, or advisers to governments, found this demeaning, exploitative, and neo-colonial. The effects of the GCRF thus undermined decolonisation.

5 | CONCLUSIONS: DECOLONISING GLOBAL RESEARCH

I have shown how the GCRF operated as a framing device for the global (Kahn, 2014; Teaiwa, 2014) in multiple ways. The GCRF shaped specific spatial and temporal practices of inclusion or exclusion, not only for research themes and objects, highlighting some while obscuring or deprioritising others, but also for collaborations and institutional hierarchies. Development practitioners felt these exclusions undermined the potential of the programme to effectively delivery ODA (Newman et al., 2019). The GCRF's global framing tended to privilege large-scale projects and expertise in the global North, and to presume international collaborators had mobility, response times, research goals, and institutional infrastructures commensurate with those found among UK academics. Its framing, as Patricia Noxolo (2017a, 2017b) argues, thus activated the legacies of colonial histories and neocolonial policies that have shaped both researchers' identities and their objects of study (see also Kraftl et al., 2018; Nolte, 2019). Like all framing practices shaping scholarly vantage points, the ethics and relationships underpinning the GCRF programme in turn shaped research designs that were never separable from the imagined "global" character of the research itself (Teaiwa, 2014).

If geographers remain concerned with the ways global unevenness has continually been perpetuated and re-inscribed through research, there are three lines of inquiry regarding the after-effects of the GCRF that should shape the next iteration of global research. These lines of enquiry are: (1) assessing the costs of GCRF failed bids; (2) evaluating the role of development sector partners and collaborators in framing global development research questions and building impact; and (4) investigating what collective and collaborative post-GCRF-award thinking across the discipline's single-country outcomes could reveal for global development. Geographers cannot leave framing the "global" of global challenges uncritically to the legacy of the GCRF, not only because there was never sufficient space for decolonial practice in the GCRF's operations (Noxolo, 2017b), but also because accepting this as a necessary architecture for global research will continue to exacerbate inequality.

Geographers have important knowledge to draw on here. The Gateway data suggested the comparative success of geographers with single-country studies was playing to geographer's research strengths and existing networks. Geographers continue to recognise, as Sassen has argued, that the global "simultaneously transcends the nation state and partly inhabits national territories and institutions" (2014, p. ix). Because geographers have long conceptualised globalisation as far more

than intensified international interdependence and the activities of institutions with a global purview, it was unsurprising that their successful GCRF projects tend to see the global as sitting deep inside national spaces. Here, the inner workings of nation states are decoupled from national governments, elites, and institutions, being shaped by processes unbounded by national borders. It follows, then, that knowledge of the global requires specialised expertise in sub-national settings where contextual detail matters profoundly. Geographers who know this intimately should keep global unevenness in focus through further single-country projects. It is through these studies of unevenness that the particularities of global research (Jazeel, 2017; Kahn, 2014) can potentially challenge any thin simplifications of global sameness emerging through the kind of challenge-led approach the GCRF exemplified (Noxolo, 2017b).

Single-country studies offer continuity, but not necessarily the comparative connections and cross-cutting analyses that might support a broader decolonisation of research, particularly through challenge-led initiatives. Thus, further work to delineate the country and regional foci of the GCRF and other global research projects in Geography could well reveal the entrenchment of Area Studies approaches under a different guise. Indeed, the shape of Geography's global may resonate with that of its old "Area." However, if new scholarship remains discipline-focused and targeted to REF strategies and thus disconnected from the former British Academy Learned Societies, accumulated knowledge and collaborations may be lost. If the GCRF's challenge-led approach obscured structural inequalities and thus reinvigorated extractive and exploitative research practices, the next iteration of research should not then fail to build on all the decolonial work, relationships, and networks previously established. This will require an improved architecture of information, one that provides more transparency and accountability than the UKRI Gateway data and uneven project web presence offers. Geography must not only attempt to decolonise its practice but be seen to do so and be able to be questioned on its ethics and approaches. Encouraging a global knowledge ecology that is inclusive and impactful, building equitable relations with colleagues in the majority world while celebrating the more worthy aspects of the discipline's Area Studies legacy, will allow development geography to persist beyond the end of the GCRF.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available via the United Kingdom Research and Innovation Gateway to Research (GtR) at https://gtr.ukri.org. Data discussed here were derived from searching the Classifications 'GCRF' and records containing 'geography' in January 2020 for a dataset last updated by UKRI in April 2018.

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ENDNOTES

[1] See https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-challenges-research-fund/global-challenges-research-fund-gcrf-how-the-fund-works (accessed 30 March 2021).

[2] Newman et al. (2019) quote text from a legacy document that reflects the purposes as stated in the launch and initial calls for proposals: www.ukri.org/files/legacy/international/gcrfodaguidance-pdf/ (accessed 30 March 2021).

[3] The text quoted by Newman et al. (2019) clearly reveals the contradictions inherent in the original goals. This iteration of the goals would have underpinned the design of the pre-2019 projects reviewed for this paper.

4 UKRI Official Development Assistance Letter 11 March 2021. See https://www.ukri.org/our-work/ukri-oda-letter-11-march-2021/ (accessed 30 March 2021).

5 In March 2021, this was – apparently temporarily – reduced to 0.5% in response to budgetary constraints.

6 UKRI Official Development Assistance Letter 11 March 2021. See https://www.ukri.org/our-work/ukri-oda-letter-11-march-2021/ (accessed 30 March 2021).

7 The current DAC List of ODA Recipients is available at: http://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-standards/DAC-List-of-ODA-Recipients-for-reporting-2018-and-2019-flows.pdf (accessed 30 March 2021).

8 See https://www.ukri.org/research/global-challenges-research-fund/funded-projects/ (accessed 30 March 2021).

9 Arts and Humanities Research Council – AHRC; Economic and Social Research Council – ESRC; Natural Environment Research Council – NERC, etc.

10 See https://re.ukri.org/news-opinions-events/blog/interdisciplinary-research-and-ref-2021/ (accessed 30 March 2021).

11 See https://gtr.ukri.org (accessed 15 October 2019).

12 Initially accessed 15 October 2019, updated 18 January 2020. Given the limitations of the data set, this has not been further updated to reflect current UKRI reporting.

13 I defined "geography" as any GCRF project listing any one or more of the following Classifications: Development Geography; Geography & Development; Human Geography (General); Urban Geography; Economic Geography; Environmental Geography; Recreational & Tourism Geography; Demography/Population Geography; Cultural and Anthropological Geography; Political Geography; Social Geography; Cultural Geography; Regional Geography. The Classifications available to applicants on Je-S have been changed in the 2015–2019 period.

14 Co-investigators' affiliations and biographies have not been included due to constraints on space. This would need further contextualisation with information on career stage, language abilities, etc., not held in the Gateway data. Given the limitations of this data set, this was deemed likely to be unproductive within the scope of the current paper.

15 It is not clear if the trend towards a single-country focus is shaped by the requirements of GCRF calls or if it demonstrates disciplinary preferences. Mapping this outcome into existing data through the archive of calls should ideally include all submitted proposals to show how geographers structure projects and their comparative success rates.

16 Natasha Bevan, British Academy, pers. comm., ex officio, 2015.

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