

UKRI ODA Review

Consequences of the 2021 ODA Budget Cuts: Key Findings

July 2022

Introduction

In February 2021, the UK Government took the decision to cut its Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget from 0.7% to 0.5% of Gross National Income (GNI). The ensuing ODA Review resulted in an overall cut of around 70% in all planned UKRI ODA expenditure for the financial year 2021/2022. **In Summer 2021, UKRI conducted a study to better understand the consequences of these budget reductions at project level, gain insight into the methods used to adapt and the extent to which projects continued to meet original call requirements.**

The UKRI ODA Evaluation Team gathered evidence in Summer 2021 through surveys of research partners: Principal Investigators (PIs) based in the UK and in-country project staff based in developing countries. Response rates for both groups were low (26% and 15% respectively).

This study therefore represents a snapshot in time, capturing the perspectives and experiences of a small cohort of UKRI's research partners in the months immediately following the ODA budget reductions. Research partners were still in the process of understanding and adapting to the reductions, in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Nonetheless, these findings provide important insights into the consequences of the ODA budget cuts for research and innovation, including for individual staff, projects and partnerships. Findings also highlight the role that institutions and award holders played in adapting to and, wherever possible, mitigating the negative consequences experienced. Following this, UKRI has taken a number of actions to further offset the reductions. Additional ODA funding of £19.7 million was made available in February 2022 across the 46 Research Organisations that were most affected by the reductions to enable them to address some of the financial impacts.

Impacts within projects

In open text boxes, respondents highlighted how **the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the consequences of the ODA budget cuts and reduced the ability of projects to adapt to them.** They described how the effects of the pandemic fell differently depending on where researchers were based, personal circumstances, characteristics, and the type of research they were undertaking.

One example given described how job insecurity was already prevalent due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was then followed by a reduction in salaried project staff positions due to the ODA budget cuts. Project staff described their inability to plan activities in the coming months due to COVID-19 travel and local restrictions, whilst at the same time they were required to set out a new project plan around a reduced budget.

"The cut was rash and spontaneous. We could not find way that can quickly cope with this sudden reduction. Very challenging to work/operate in already low research funding amidst the COVID-19 pandemic." - In-country respondent

Mitigation measures

In some cases, respondents described increased collaboration and the development of support systems within partnerships. Examples of this include introducing mental health workshops, capacity development to strengthen in-country research capabilities and devising alternative short-term solutions to continue research. Narratives indicated a strong sense of shared purpose and determination to protect investments (funds, time, and resources) already made, and ensure research objectives remained achievable.

When asked whether any alternative funds had been secured to fill the gap required for projects to continue against original project plans, 80% of in-country partners responded with no. **Just under half (49%) of PIs stated that the UK lead organisation had made a financial contribution to support the continuation of the project.** Only 16% of PIs reported receiving funding from other sources.

Emotional burden

Overall, respondents described the setting of the COVID-19 pandemic and ODA budget reductions as a stressful period where there was a lack of permanent solutions, communication, and forward plans, contributing to an emotional burden on project staff.

“I am just very saddened by this reality, it required huge emotional labour to let go of staff, to go to communities and explain certain things were no longer possible - it has been a stressful time, I have never had panic attacks before, but since the cuts I have had three panic attacks, and during the beginning of the cuts, was having night sweats and night terrors, it has been a horrible experience.” - In-country respondent

Impacts on partnerships

PI respondents indicated that **250 partnerships or research collaborations across 48 different countries were affected by the ODA budget reductions.**

Whilst over half (54%) of in-country partners stated that the cuts had no impact on relationships with partners and research collaborations, around a quarter indicated there had been a negative impact. A further 18% suggested it was too soon to predict how relationships might change. Examples of negative impacts on partnerships given include a reduction in information sharing, collaboration and knowledge transfer, feelings of uncertainty or frustration, and a loss of trust.

“Some partners have lost confidence in our ability to achieve what was originally agreed and others have broken off the collaboration altogether, as they no longer believe in us.”
- In-country respondent

Respondents described how increased reliance and pressure was placed on current partnerships and networks, or those they were able to maintain, outside of the scope initially agreed. This was proposed without clear end dates, an understanding of when pressure might be eased, or where compensation would come from, particularly where projects were in early phases.

There were in-country partners however, who highlighted that some partnerships were strengthened because of losing, or shifting their focus or reliance on, UK partnerships.

Consequences for the UK's reputation

When PIs were asked if they believed that the reputation of the UK as a go-to partner in ODA research had been damaged, nearly 89% agreed that it had been. PIs suggested that the damage to the UK's reputation would be difficult, if not impossible, to reverse, and that they personally had lost trust in the UK government as a funder for ODA research, as well as in UKRI as a delivery partner.

PIs expressed frustration that the UK government's actions reflected upon them as researchers. In many cases they described working personally with in-country partners to mitigate the impacts of the ODA budget cuts. They were working to maintain partnerships and networks established over years, which they felt were being eroded in the space of days.

Survey responses from in-country partners indicate a reduction in their likelihood to partner with a UK researcher. 15% were 'unlikely' or 'very unlikely' to partner with a UK researcher after the ODA budget cuts, compared to just 1% beforehand.

The perception that there is a risk of similar or further funding cuts in future, was continually cited as a reason against considering new UK partnerships. In-country partners reported viewing partnerships with alternative nations, such as the USA and China, as preferential in order to diversify pools of funding and gain a more reliable footing.

"This funding cut has exacerbated the overall precarity of Global South institutions like us, that are dependent on international funding over the long- term to take on complex problems of human development, and to train researchers, scholars and practitioners to have independent voice and agency, and secure positive impacts into the future. The funding cut has summarily changed the nature of the relationship between UK funding and global South institutions. It was earlier experienced as long- term commitment from the UK to areas of complex and deep global challenges, built across projects, to one that is transactional and limited to the time and scale of singular projects." - In-country respondent

The impact on communities

61% of respondents based in developing countries, and 59% of UK-based PIs, agreed there had been, or was likely to be in time, an impact on communities as a result of the ODA budget cuts.

"Our study evaluates the implementation of novel preventative treatment in pregnant women to reduce the risk of malaria during pregnancy. With a shorter project duration, fewer pregnant women will benefit." - In-country respondent

82% of in-country respondents and 77% of UK PIs reported project plans and objectives were affected by the ODA budget reductions. However, only 9% and 7% respectively indicated that these effects were permanent, with **the majority suggesting effects could be reversed if funding was reinstated.** 65% of in-country partners and 59% of UK-based PIs indicated that projects could, at least partly, be brought back on track.

Consequences to translation activities

77% of in-country respondents and 54% of UK respondents stated that the ODA budget cuts had affected translation activities. Influencing policy was the most frequently highlighted translation activity as no longer taking place. Respondents described how the loss of funding had led to decreased participation at local level, i.e., workshops or data collection within the community, because these activities are costly, requiring time and travel. As a result, insights and experiences of communities are less able to be evidenced and escalated to local or national government, in order to influence policy and decision making.

The perceptions of communities

In-country respondents reported that the communities they work with described feeling 'left out', 'disrespected' and 'let down'.

"We all understand the big impact that the pandemic has had on research and funding priorities, and we also understand that governments need to strike a balance between different policy priorities. However, both the form and the substance of the funding cuts have been extremely disappointing and embarrassing. I felt offended as a researcher, and as someone trying to promote collaboration and community engagement in a highly complex context. I feel very ashamed with the communities and policymakers whom I had told that this was a path-breaking project. My credibility suffered from these funding reductions. I am even embarrassed with the staff I hired - young women with wonderful potential to become practitioners and policymakers, because I had to tell them that their fascinating capacity-building job was now uncertain." - In-country respondent

Many respondents described how those who are hardest to reach, i.e., located in rural or unstable settings, have been removed from projects first, as they require the most resource and funding to engage with. Examples given were women and girls in conflict affected areas and survivors of rape.

"We had planned a number of meetings and focus group discussions to understand drought impacts and the vulnerability of communities to shocks. We also planned to develop resilience pathways with the communities. We have not been able to hold the sessions, so the situation basically remains the same." - In-country respondent

Equality, diversity and inclusion: project staff

We asked PIs if there had been, or was likely to be, an impact on staff as individuals and in terms of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). PIs indicated that, where feasible, staffing and resource were retained to ensure projects could resume should funding being reinstated.

Nonetheless, at the time of the surveys being circulated, **28 out of the 168 PIs who responded reported having to make redundancies, affecting 95 researchers and other project staff,** across the following 12 countries and/or nations: Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, UK, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe.

52% of responding PIs stated that following the ODA budget cuts, there had been a change to the working hours and capacity of project staff dedicated towards ODA projects. Changes cited

included increasing hours for existing staff as cover for previously agreed salaried positions which could no longer be funded, and unpaid or voluntary work.

In-country respondents gave examples of changes to staffing which had led to legal and contractual implications, and engagement with local unions, as well as staff leaving posts ahead of completing contracts to take up an alternative role they considered as more secure. Respondents described facing a skills shortage, or a lack of experience required, to meet project objectives as a result.

“Uncertainties and not knowing whether the project will continue to its completion, or what the next budget will be, destabilises focus reducing productivity, reducing engagement with communities and cutting back on activities on the ground has resulted in mistrust with communities for future engagements and broken promises.” - In-country respondent

Early Career Researchers (ECRs), particularly those based in developing countries, are reported as being disproportionately affected by the ODA budget cuts. The effects described include cancelled opportunities for working jointly with more experienced researchers and the shortening of contracts.

We asked PIs about the impacts, if any, on EDI from the changes made to staffing on projects as a result of the loss of funding. In this section, some PI respondents highlighted female staff as being adversely affected, giving examples such as accepting salary reductions and being recruited for roles which funding was then withdrawn for, leaving the applicant without employment.

In some narratives within this section of the surveys and shared as part of open text boxes, impacts were described as leading to reduced female engagement and representation in fieldwork and data collection, therefore excluding some opportunities for female perspective and inclusion, and gender equality, from interventions.

“Collaborative research designs with locally based women's groups have had to be revised resulting in the inability to meet expectations, deadlines, payments. Partnerships with these groups were based on years of women's movement networking and activism. The applied theatre/action research activity with war-affected women in particular, would have reinforced these networks. This has been affected by the funding cuts.” - In-country respondent

A range of measures were reported as being taken both within the UK and in developing countries where work was taking place, to alleviate EDI impacts. These included prioritising the EDI elements of project plans across partnerships, such as safeguarding and gender equality, dedicating funding towards retaining female researchers and ECRs, and the provision of training for searching for alternative employment.

Inclusive communications and decision making

Responses indicated that the way in which the ODA budget cuts were announced and communicated to partners, worsened the impact on projects and partnerships.

Narratives described how a more collaborative decision-making process could have minimised the impacts and prioritised the most vulnerable and most critical areas of research. **Respondents suggested that the ODA budget cuts disregarded the ODA principle of ‘do no harm’ and did**

not address core priorities such as equitable partnerships, safeguarding, risk assessment and gender equality.

“We wish the funding cut was communicated timely and at an earlier stage before we made any commitments. It has been quite a struggle to explain why the cut was made so abruptly and so dramatically. As mentioned, this has caused my organisation considerable reputational risk and credibility, community relationships have broken down.”

- In-country respondent

Inequitable partnerships

In-country partners described the ODA budget cuts as highlighting that research partnerships between the global north and south remain inequitable, even though gains have been made through funds like the GCRF. In-country partners conveyed feeling *‘disposable’*, being *‘taken less seriously’* than their UK counterparts and more easily *‘disregarded’*.

PIs corroborated the unequal distribution of the impacts, citing examples of in-country partners receiving no communication, contributing their own funds, through or in partnership with local governments or institutions, and facing job insecurity. On a broader level, respondents spoke to inequalities across the research community and the weighted reliance on the UK government as a funder.

Final reflections

We would like to thank UKRI's grant holders and partners in the UK and around the world who took the time to respond to surveys and share their experiences and perspectives. This study provided valuable insight into the consequences of the ODA budget cuts for projects, staff, partners and communities at a very difficult point in time.

What is also evident from survey responses is the collective endeavour shown by UKRI grant holders and partners to ensure ODA research continued – be it research organisations stepping up to fill the funding gap, staff adapting working patterns, or re-designing project plans to prioritise the most critical elements of research. Steps taken by UKRI in the months following the surveys were designed to help support this collective effort and work alongside the research community to mitigate the budget reductions. Investing in research and innovation to tackle global challenges, address the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and enable diverse and equitable partnerships is vital and remains a priority for UKRI.