‘Critical perspectives on building research capacity in the global south’

A studentship proposal from the Open University and Christian Aid, located in the Pathway in Development Policy and Practice in the ESRC Grand Union Doctoral Training Partnership

In 2016 The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), a 5-year £1.5Bn fund, was launched to encourage UK researchers to play a leading role in addressing the problems faced by developing countries. One of the three pillars of the fund focuses on strengthening capacity for research and innovation within both the UK and developing countries. But what is research capacity and what does it mean to strengthen it?

As an International NGO which focuses on partnership, Christian Aid has long been interested in ideas of capacity development. Christian Aid understands this as a process of mutual exchange – working through partners while standing alongside them, and building learning and understanding of development through engagement. This process of engagement informs Christian Aid’s ideas about research and research capacity.

This PhD studentship seeks to explore what it means to strengthen research capacity in the global south and questions who could be involved in strengthening research capacity. For example, does the GCRF call suggest uni-directional capacity development (a technical skill that Northern institutions own and can apply in the global south)? How can existing research capacity within a country be identified? What does research capacity mean in different contexts? Where does capacity reside and what does it look like? How do national knowledge eco-systems function and interact with global systems? Would a deeper understanding of research capacity enable Christian Aid and others to work better to reduce the inequalities that exist in how knowledge production is conceived globally? What would a mutual or equitable approach to research capacity development look like, and what would need to change for this to be possible? How can research capacity be better understood and operationalised as a dynamic, sustainable concept and process?

These questions are important at both conceptual and practical levels. Christian Aid is an agency which argues that poverty is caused by unequal power relations. It is therefore interested in how research capacity development contributes to transforming power relations (or alternatively entrenches pre-existing power relations). Within Christian Aid, the Centre of Excellence for Research, Evidence and Learning has capacity strengthening as one of its key remits. It hopes to nurture skills and knowledges in Christian staff (both in the UK and country offices) so that they are able to develop strong research partnerships and practices that will complement and reinforce their programme and policy work focused on poverty eradication. The Centre therefore needs to understand the knowledge ecosystems/evidence landscapes that already exist in the countries where Christian Aid works, and to be able to target engagement appropriately.

The PhD studentship has been co-created between Christian Aid and the Open University to help understand more deeply the question of research capacity. The research will be rooted both in existing literature and collaboration with one or two Christian Aid offices in the global south to investigate how research capacity is understood in those contexts, and to identify what is required to understand and build research capacity more broadly. One possible way forward would be to focus on a country that is perceived as having greater research capacity (through its interaction with global research processes, its national academia and publishing...
record) and one that is seen as having lower capacity (potentially due to language exclusions, economy, history and education systems).

The doctoral student would be able to link to one or more of Christian Aid’s country offices. Although not a requirement, we welcome applications from those with strong connections to a country or countries where Christian Aid has a programme, and who may be originally from the country and/or eventually considering relocation. Prior knowledge and experience of a country context would facilitate working closely with a country team. It could also enable the doctoral student to contribute to strengthening research capacity in the country, during and beyond the studentship.

As well as the facilities available to doctoral students at the OU, Christian Aid would make office space available in London, encourage close links with the Centre of Excellence in Research, Evidence and Learning, and facilitate mutually beneficial access to country programmes.

Guidance for applicants

Applications are now invited for this studentship with the deadline of 17.00 UK time, 19th January 2018. The studentship can either be 3 years full-time (fully funded) or 6 years part-time (50% funded). If part-time, you need to be able to commit 50% of your time to the PhD. Please note that for this studentship, you need either to have gained an MRes or have equivalent research training and experience. Please also check ESRC residential criteria: http://www.granduniondtp.ac.uk/eligibility.

The application procedure should follow that laid out in the Development Policy and Practice Pathway. However please make clear that you are applying for this studentship on your application form by including the studentship title. As well as following the guidance for applicants in the Development Policy and Practice Pathway, in your proposal please explain how you would approach the research in way such that it would:

a. Make an original contribution to academic knowledge
b. Build ‘research capacity’ through the process
c. Deliver appropriate practitioner focussed outputs during the process (details to be determined based on wider methodological discussions)

Applying for a studentship:

1. Applications should include a cover letter outlining why the project is an important area of study, how your background relates to the proposed research topic and why you wish to study at the Open University;
2. An outline research proposal of no more than 2,000 words, including the rationale for the research topic, its significance, a summary of literature, research questions and methodology. General advice on writing a proposal can be found here (although bear in mind that this one needs to be 2,000 words): http://www.open.ac.uk/postgraduate/research-degrees/how-to-apply/mphil-and-phd-application-process; if you need additional advice, please contact Hazel Johnson or Ben Lampert;
3. An academic CV that includes contact details of three referees, of which at least two should be academic;
For further information about the Centre for Excellent in Research, Evidence and Learning, see: