

ESRC-DFID Development Frontiers Call 2 Scoping Workshop 7 March 2016 Report



Introduction	1
Workshop content.....	2
Framing presentations	2
Discussion on the scientific focus of the call.....	3
Discussion on commissioning the call	5
Conclusions.....	6

Introduction

In March 2016 ESRC and DFID convened a half-day workshop at The Royal Society in London to help scope a forthcoming £2.5 million research call focused on the intersections between sustainability, poverty and conflict/fragility. This call within the Development Frontiers scheme forms part of the ESRC-DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research (www.esrc.ac.uk/dfid). The workshop’s aim was to gather input from an engaged and varied audience to help inform decisions on both the call’s scientific scope and the process for commissioning it.

The workshop was attended by more than 120 delegates from 90 organisations, representing a range of academic disciplines, sectors and expertise. Around 70 per cent were academics, with the remaining participants comprising representatives from the third sector, business/private sector, public sector, and other non-academic sectors. Whilst the majority of academics attending were social scientists, a very large percentage of those worked across disciplinary boundaries, including with non-social science. Participants from both the natural sciences and arts/humanities also provided varied perspectives and approaches. The workshop was live streamed to make it accessible for those unable to attend in person. A further 30-40 participants joined via the live stream, and there was strong engagement on social media which enabled those attending remotely to contribute.

Simon Maxwell, appointed by ESRC and DFID as the director for this call, led the workshop. It began with an introduction from Simon, followed by an introduction to the background of the call and its context within the portfolios of both ESRC and DFID. This was provided by Craig Bardsley, Head of the ESRC International Development Research Team, and DFID's Head of Profession for Social Development, Andrew Long. The introductory session was followed by presentations from the three keynote speakers - Nick Mabey (E3G), Frances Stewart (University of Oxford) and Johan Schot (University of Sussex) - with a subsequent plenary, moving into a World Café style discussion in the second half of the workshop. The day concluded with a question and answer session as well as invited comments from the floor, followed by a brief description from ESRC of the potential next steps and indicative timescale. The formal programme was followed by further opportunity for networking and informal discussion. Slides from all sessions are included in a separate document.

Workshop content

Framing presentations

Simon Maxwell's (<http://www.simonmaxwell.eu/>) introduction reminded the audience that Development Frontiers research is intended to be pioneering, innovative and potentially higher risk social science-led research. There is an emphasis on collaboration, deep engagement of policy-makers and work that is catalytic in terms of influencing policy. This is especially appropriate to the issue of addressing what Simon termed the 'wicked problem' of delivering both poverty reduction and sustainability in the context of the SDGs, and how this intersects with conflict and fragility. Simon emphasised the scale of global transition required to achieve carbon and other greenhouse gas targets, and the consequent need for research that spans from micro to macro levels.

Nick Mabey (<https://www.e3g.org/people/nick-mabey>), Chief Executive and a founder director, E3G (Third Generation Environmentalism) was asked to speak to the transformational changes which bringing climate and the SDGs together pose, and what it takes to make such change happen. Nick's presentation explored the intertwined challenges of resilience and sustainability, and the sometimes competing agendas of short-term versus long-term solutions. Nick identified three core challenges in the intersection between climate change and sustainable development: How do we co-develop new economic models fast enough to meet this challenge? How do we understand the political economy of meeting this challenge? How do we understand the building of resilience in societies to meet this challenge? He highlighted the danger of 'building the wrong thing' with the "wall of capacity building money coming out post-Paris", and acknowledged the difficult fact that some people will inevitably lose out in the short term, and instabilities will be brought about as we seek to move towards sustainability. Nick's insightful presentation highlighted the severity and scale of the challenge at hand, and the urgent need for a response, including from research.

Frances Stewart (http://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/people/arDetails?qeh_id=STEIFF), former Director of ODID and the Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity (CRISE), Oxford University, was invited to speak to the 'conflict' which the challenge of the sustainable development agenda may generate or exacerbate. Based on definitions of 'conflict' as "large scale violence in a country" and 'fragility' as "vulnerability in a weak state that doesn't have the capacity to deal with these problems", Frances explored the question

of whether - and if so, how - climate change is likely to worsen conflict. Recognising that conflict is often a result of social, political and economic inequalities between groups, she discussed the fact that the poorest countries and people are the most likely to be worst hit by the impacts of climate change which would further drive inequalities within and between states and populations. Frances' presentation asked complex and challenging questions of the audience, and finished with her suggestions for a potential research agenda.

Johan Schot (<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/profiles/238749>), Director of the Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU), University of Sussex, focused on the challenge of innovation and interdisciplinary research in a rapidly changing environment, and how these can best be supported. Johan emphasised the need to respond to the current 'deep transition'; in order to effect real change many systems need to transition simultaneously in similar directions, which is an enormous challenge. Johan highlighted the need for alignment between technical and social innovation, for innovation that moves beyond the usual circles of science and engineering, for open and flexible experimentation, and for circulation of ideas and the benefits that come from them. He stressed the need to bridge gaps to facilitate the transdisciplinary research built on long-term relationships between researchers and policy makers, including gaps between disciplines, methods, sectors and approaches.

Discussion on the scientific focus of the call

Building on the engaging and thought-provoking presentations from the keynote speakers, a plenary session and later discussion explored the issues raised around the scientific scope of the call. This was intended to speak to questions set out in an initial scoping document available on the ESRC website (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/news-events-and-publications/events/esrc-dfid-development-frontiers-scoping-workshop-the-intersection-of-sustainability-poverty-and-conflict-fragility/>):

- In the broad field set out for this call, what problems are just wicked enough that Frontiers research can make a substantive and sustained difference to tackling them?
- Where could a relatively small scale investment act as a real catalyst for change?
- What ground is already well covered and should be avoided?
- Without diminishing the importance of local context, how can we stimulate theoretical advances to make research insights more generalisable?

Initial plenary discussion following the keynote speakers explored topics including: the relationship between climate change, conflict and migration; the involvement of non-social science in the upcoming call; the challenges of interdisciplinary working and the role of system dynamics in this; the importance of understanding tipping/ 'catalytic' points; the role of education and learning in these discussions; the pros and cons of attempting innovative research; and the difficult but vital challenge of bridging the gap between research and policy. Participants suggested that funders need to ensure assessment processes allow space for blue sky thinking, that the kind of analysis supported should take into account issues of accountability, and that there is a need to push against siloisation to effectively answer important questions with creative solutions. Many of these comments and themes were reflected in the final responses from keynote speakers, who emphasised the need for engagement with policymakers, the value of multidisciplinary research, and the need to be responsive to tipping points.

Overall there was strong engagement across all three of the identified areas of interest for this call - poverty/sustainable development, climate change, and conflict/fragility - and crucially engagement was shown across these areas. There was also a strong confirmation of the need to actively engage multiple disciplines, including the natural sciences, and recognition of the challenges therein. Challenges to this identified by participants not only related to meaningful interdisciplinary working within projects themselves, but also problems such as contrasting single- versus multi-author publication norms in the social and natural sciences respectively. In general participants viewed interdisciplinary and/or multidisciplinary research as highly valuable and as uniquely placed to address the issues at hand in new and innovative ways. As well as the need to embed perspectives from a range of disciplines, there was also a strong message from workshop participants to both applicants and funders of the need for policy maker engagement from the early stages of the call and throughout. The difficulties faced in successfully achieving this were readily acknowledged.

Workshop participants were also asked to note down the key research question(s) and/or area of focus that they felt the forthcoming Development Frontiers call should address. These were collated by the funders, who will conduct further analysis and feed this into the further scoping and development of the call. A range of potential areas of focus were identified, and key words used were reflective of all three focus areas for the call, and the appetite for innovation and cross-boundary engagement that the funders hope to promote through this call. This is shown in a word cloud generated after the workshop from participants' proposed call research topics:



Discussion on commissioning the call

Plenary and group level discussion at the workshop also focused on issues related to the process and delivery of innovative, interdisciplinary research, including suggestions for the specific process for this call. This was intended to respond to a second set of questions set out in the initial scoping paper:

- What needs to be done differently to generate and deliver this kind of research?
- What are the risks involved and when do they become too high?
- What kinds of partnerships and projects are most likely to succeed and how can they be facilitated?
- What are the barriers to genuine interdisciplinary research, and how can these be overcome?
- What is the best way meaningfully to engage practitioners in the design, conduct and uptake of such research?

Simon Maxwell introduced the topic by asking participants to reflect on an agile and cost-effective process for achieving the kind of collaboration required to deliver Frontiers research. He identified a series of key questions: should collaboration be self-organised or brokered; if brokered, via events or a platform; at national or regional level; and how could international participation best be secured? In his presentation, Simon signposted various check-lists of how to encourage multidisciplinary collaboration. Participants were also asked to comment on what they would love to see in terms of the call format and process, and what they would urge the funders to avoid.

A strong theme which came out both verbally and in written comments was the need for developing country representation and engagement throughout the process, and the issue of policy maker engagement came to the fore. Some participants commended the funders for trying to do things differently and seeking to embed interdisciplinarity, partnerships and different perspectives into the scoping of their call, while recognising the complexity of achieving this.

Overall there was strong interest for non-standard commissioning and in particular a two - or more - stage process which involved relatively short written proposals in the first instance perhaps followed by a pitching process for shortlisted applicants. Whilst there was some interest among a number of participants for a commissioning model known as a 'sandpit' - an immerse, week-long process where applicants present their proposal to a panel on the final day - the majority of the room was not in favour of this mechanism. As acknowledged by the call director, this model had been discussed early in the development of this call, but concerns expressed about its limitations not only within the room but also the wider community were appreciated and taken into account.

A relatively common concern within the room related to the amount of money available, and what could feasibly be achieved with this; it was generally felt that the 'pot' was relatively small. Despite this, enthusiasm for the call remained high and a number of participants offered solutions to try and maximise the investment. Suggestions included the inclusion of more early and middle career researchers, who importantly offer new ways of thinking, a suggestion largely supported within the room. On a related note the majority of participants agreed that they would be keen to engage in a process which did not measure

impact in terms of journal publications, especially if the funders want to encourage interdisciplinary working in which academic publication is more complex.

An additional suggestion to help improve value for money was the notion of sharing of resources across projects; for example, one individual could be employed to work on impact across multiple projects, which would have the added benefit of fostering cohesion and collaboration. It was also suggested that the money available might be productively used for secondary research, or alternatively that this call should be seen as 'seed money' to explore risky ideas that could then be pursued further using additional sources of funding (either ESRC/DFID or otherwise).

In the discussion, there was also a difference of opinion regarding the degree to which funders should stipulate the focus of the call. These ranged from requests for the funders to be "bold" and not specify any particular topic – as was the case in the first call under the Development Frontiers scheme – to a suggestion that the funders should be very prescriptive and dictate all the parameters of a case study to be conducted, with applicants then tendering to fulfil particular pre-defined roles within this. The majority, however, seemed to fall somewhere in between these two viewpoints, calling for some degree of refined focus but with space for interpretation, exploration and creativity.

In terms of the number and value of grants to be funded through this call, there was a strong rejection of the idea of an outright 'winner takes all' approach but a variety of different opinions on what suitable grant sizes would look like; some suggested that all grants should be small (~£100k), whereas others felt that there needed to be a reasonable investment in a project to achieve meaningful success and that one or two larger projects would therefore be more appropriate.

Conclusions

The scoping workshop provided useful and informative insights into the shape of the field, into barriers to innovative research and interdisciplinary working, into interest in the proposed area of research, and into appetite from the community for non-traditional modes of commissioning. The funders have been provided with a range of interesting suggestions from this engaged cohort, as well as questions they need to address and considerations which need to be borne in mind in the further development of this call.

The key takeaway messages from this workshop are the value and challenges of interdisciplinary working, the importance of embedding policy maker needs and perspectives throughout the process, and a desire from the community to explore alternative modes of commissioning which allow for concept development and the opportunity to pitch their ideas rather than submitting lengthy written applications which may not come to fruition.

These valuable insights will be fed into the further development of the call, alongside other consultation as needed, with the aim to ensure the accessibility, appropriateness and attractiveness of the call for both academic and non-academic partners alike, as well as maximising potential for impact, innovation and delivery of the research programme's goals.