

# Learning for Consortia: UK Aid Connect Lessons

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## About the Learning from Consortia programme

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The Learning from Consortia programme brings together 13 consortia formed by diverse organisations to facilitate collective learning and support consortia to deliver their outcomes. The programme aims to learn from the consortia's experiences and insights to draw out good practice in consortium working, as well as helping organisations and donors understand how they can best support consortia.

## About Bond

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Bond is the UK network for organisations working in international development. We unite and support a diverse network of over 450 civil society organisations and allies to help eradicate global poverty, inequality and injustice. We also deliver a range of services to help organisations be more effective and improve the quality and impact of their work.

## About The Partnering Initiative

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An internationally recognised pioneer of the field, The Partnering Initiative (TPI) is a global NGO dedicated to unleashing the power of partnership for a sustainable future. TPI combines cutting-edge partnering theory, policy interventions and direct action globally to support and build the capacity of organisations, partnerships and platforms to deliver effective, value-creating collaboration.

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\*The ASPIRE consortium is registered with the FCDO as 'Building resiliency and gender equality of the most marginalised communities through multisector approaches to delivering quality sexual and reproductive health and rights'.

\*\*The PACE consortium is registered with the FCDO as 'Effective approaches to ending the worst forms of child labour in fragile contexts (EAPAC)'.

The Learning from Consortia programme is led by Bond, The Partnering Initiative, and an academic advisory board, and is funded by UK aid.

Find out more about the programme by visiting: [www.bond.org.uk/resources-support/learning-fromconsortia](http://www.bond.org.uk/resources-support/learning-fromconsortia).

## Disclaimer

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This expert review of UK Aid Connect was funded by UK aid from the UK government; however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies. Contextual factors have meant that the Learning from Consortia programme was not able to conduct research into the effectiveness or impact of work conducted by UK Aid Connect consortia and focused only on the way the programme was initiated. The FCDO will publish further learning from UK Aid Connect through the Annual Review process. [Annual Reviews are publicly available on DevTracker](#).

## Introduction

This review presents the emerging lessons and recommendations from the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)'s [UK Aid Connect](#) programme. The programme opened for application in 2017, with the aim of supporting civil society-led consortia to create innovative solutions to complex development challenges that deliver real change to the lives of people living in poverty.

This review is one of the final outputs from the [Learning from Consortia](#) programme, which was funded through UK Aid Connect to support the 14 consortia and generate learning around the programme's five cross-cutting themes: consortia working; innovation; community engagement; gender equality; and Value for Money<sup>1</sup>.

This review is neither an evaluation of the UK Aid Connect programme, nor of the performance of the funded consortia. The learning and recommendations presented here focus on the funding model, rather than on consortia practice, with the intention of supporting funders, policy makers and other stakeholders to design future funding initiatives for complex, collaborative programmes. More in-depth examples of good practice in consortia working are documented in the accompanying practitioners' guide and other [outputs from the Learning from Consortia programme](#).

## Methodology

The six-month research programme developed an iterative, participatory approach that aimed to:

- i) identify UK Aid Connect's approach to each of the five themes (through analysis of programme documentation including the Business Case, Application Terms of Reference and the original Results Framework);
- ii) reflect on consortia experiences across the five themes (in 'communities of practice' and through interviews, comparative analysis of consortia programme summaries, and some analysis of data from consortia health checks);
- iii) propose adjustments to frameworks in response to consortia experiences and relevant evidence from the wider literature (in conversation with UK Aid Connect consortia);
- iv) [develop resources](#) to support funders, policy makers and practitioners.

The research was conducted over a particularly complex period for the programme, as a result of the UK's change in official development assistance (ODA) commitment and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. This has, to an extent, limited engagement with the FCDO and consortia members, particularly those based in countries of implementation. Therefore, emerging lessons are presented tentatively, with the aim of stimulating further deliberation around the cross-cutting themes and informing the design of future funding schemes.

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<sup>1</sup> This slight reframing rewards some of the original UK Aid Connect themes: consortia approach; innovation; gender equality; beneficiary feedback; and value for money. See: [www.gov.uk/international-development-funding/uk-aid-connect#background-information-on-the-fund](http://www.gov.uk/international-development-funding/uk-aid-connect#background-information-on-the-fund).

# UK Aid Connect funding model and context

## Business case

UK Aid Connect was grounded in a vision of supporting civil society-led consortia to facilitate innovative, evidence-informed responses to complex development challenges. An extensive consultation informed the business case<sup>2</sup>, which was based on the assumption that a consortia model would deliver innovative approaches leading to better development outcomes and better Value for Money than a single organisation model, providing certain criteria were met. These included increasing the diversity of providers through an open, competitive and outcome-focused model of funding (presumed to be more enabling of innovation than the longer-term, unrestricted funding that had been limited to a small pool of providers) and ensuring sufficient capacity for effective consortia working. The business case also noted: 'Managing through a single consortium by theme, rather than numerous individual institutional grants with a range of different agencies requires less DFID staff resources both in policy and programme management.' Although additional consortia were subsequently funded under several themes<sup>3</sup>, the intention was to save resources by passing some management responsibility from funder to consortia lead. The business case also emphasised the value of *learning* for funders and implementers alike, of *adaptive programming*, and of attention to the *environmental impact*<sup>4</sup> of consortia.

Key policy documents underpinning the UK Aid Connect business case include the [UK's 2015 Aid Strategy](#) and DFID (the UK Department for International Development – now FCDO)'s 2016 [Civil Society Partnership Review](#), which set out how the UK government would use its partnerships with civil society to support delivery of the aid strategy.

## Programme delivery

Funds were made available for consortia under eight thematic areas for up to four years, including a six-to-nine-month co-creation phase. The fund opened for applications in July 2017 for two months. The one-stage application process was intended to be light-touch to enhance accessibility and inclusion and to minimise the investment of resources into unsuccessful applications. The intention was that this would be supplemented with a substantial co-creation phase, recognising the challenges of consortia working and the importance of establishing strong foundations and co-designing programmes. 14 consortia were subsequently approved for co-creation funding with 13 progressing to implementation.

Changes to the domestic and international context as well as to the internal administration of the fund have had a significant impact on the planned delivery of UK Aid Connect, primarily on project timelines and funding levels. Delays have seriously affected the approval of individual grants to consortia at both co-creation and implementation stages. Expected timelines have been impacted by multiple events, including: the 2018 safeguarding crisis in the UK's international non-governmental organisation (INGO) sector, the Brexit process, ministerial changes, the Covid-19 pandemic, the DFID-FCO merger and cross-government ODA prioritisation process in 2020. Committed funding has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic's impact on the UK economy and the subsequent reduction in ODA funding available in FY20/21, and the reduction of the UK's ODA commitment from 0.7% to 0.5% for FY21/22. Savings of £8.6m required by the prioritisation process on UK Aid Connect in FY20/21

<sup>2</sup> See: [https://iati.fcdo.gov.uk/iati\\_documents/21706742.odt](https://iati.fcdo.gov.uk/iati_documents/21706742.odt).

<sup>3</sup> This funding of additional consortia impacted on DFID/FCDO resources with implications for staff availability to engage with the consortia.

<sup>4</sup> Although this was emphasised in the business case and annual reviews, the environmental impact of consortia was not included in results frameworks and rarely mentioned in consortia documentation, until environmental benefits were identified as by-products of travel restrictions imposed by Covid-19.

required nine consortia to make budget cuts equivalent to 20% of their planned FY20/21 spend. The ODA reduction to 0.5% has led to the early closure of several UK Aid Connect programmes as well as the wrap-around Learning from Consortia programme, and funding reductions to the remaining consortia. Decisions about which consortia to continue were informed in part by new political priorities as laid out in the [Integrated Review 2021](#).

## Composition of the UK Aid Connect consortia

UK Aid Connect has been successful in bringing together a broader range of organisations, working together in new collaborations (see Figure 1). The fund also attracted successful applications from some first-time recipients of UK Aid funding (See Annual Review 2019).

Figure 1: Consortia membership by organisation

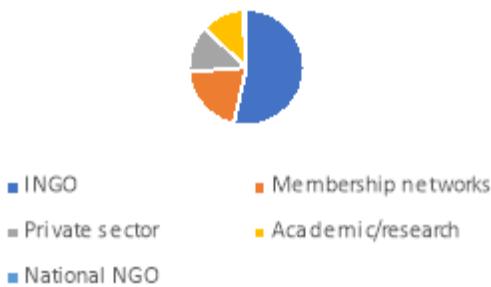
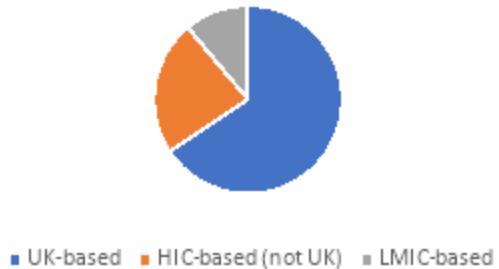


Figure 2: Consortia membership by country



However, the programme was less successful in achieving geopolitical diversity (see Figure 2). 65% of funded consortium members were UK-registered organisations and only 11% of official members were organisations registered in a low-or-middle-income country (LMIC). This meant few of these organisations were involved in the early phases of consortia formation and proposal design, and a large portion of funds was invested in UK-based organisations. As Box 1 indicates, just two consortia (14%) included members from at least one of their implementation contexts.

### Box 1: Examples of diverse consortia

While many consortia brought together a diverse range of organisations, only two of the fourteen included formal members from their countries of implementation:

[The i2i consortium](#) includes organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) from Kenya and Bangladesh as well as international NGOs and multilateral partners (for example, the UN's International Labour Organization and the World Bank). This ensured the programme was relevant and responsive to local and national needs and priorities while contributing to longer-term sustainability and international agendas.

[The Freedom of Religion or Belief Leadership Network \(FoRBLN\) consortium](#), led by the Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion (CSSC) at the University of Oxford, brings together the Church of England (as a 'Tier 2' member) and the International Panel of Parliamentarians for FoRB ('Tier 3') to create a freedom of religion or belief leadership network (FoRBLN). Additional 'Tier 3' members included organisations based in two of the implementation contexts (Bangladesh and Pakistan) as well as pan-African network organisations.

## Emerging lessons and recommendations

This section outlines lessons relating to each LFC research theme, together with a set of recommendations.

### Lesson 1: Consortia working

*Supporting effective consortia to deliver transformational change requires carefully designed funding, capacity development and management models, and early consideration of context.*

Recognising the challenges around consortia working that had emerged from the consultation and a commissioned review<sup>5</sup>, DFID had allocated significant resources to a co-creation phase, during which consortia would test their approaches, establish governance processes, and design programmes and monitoring, evaluation and learning strategies. Most of the consortia leads agreed that this dedicated time was extremely valuable<sup>6</sup>. For example, the co-creation phase allowed funded consortia the flexibility and funding to establish a variety of governance and leadership models with significant variation in how decision-making power was distributed. Examples of devolved leadership included the [Smart Peace consortium](#)'s use of 'Country-Level Hubs', [the ECID consortium's](#) use of 'Country Taskforces' and [The Development Alternative consortium's](#) 'youth-led governance model'.

However, consortia also reflected that the co-creation phase came too late to support consortia formation and ensure optimal geo-political diversity of consortium. This was because consortia-formation had already occurred at proposal stage, with proposed membership based, in some cases, on assumptions about what would make a more competitive application, rather than what would be most appropriate for a given context or development challenge, to maximise 'collaborative advantage'. In some cases, implementation countries were only specified during the co-creation phase, meaning that the initial process of consortia-building was largely decontextualized.

Moreover, despite DFID's investment in designing robust monitoring and learning processes relating to the programme themes, support for learning about working in consortia started much later. The wrap-around Learning from Consortia programme, for example, was not established until 2020, which limited the extent to which it was able to provide meaningful support for the first wave of consortia and robust and responsible evidence around the cross-cutting themes. However, as evidenced by the surveys conducted through the Cross-Consortia Aid Connect (CCAC) group, consortia still found the advisory support and the communities of practice to be valuable resources for reflecting on and improving practice (see also [practitioners' guide](#) for further details).

Other aspects that consortia felt received inadequate attention related to frameworks and tools for Thinking and Working Politically<sup>7</sup>, as well as learning and adaptive management, though these had received significant attention by DFID and the wider development sector before the UK Aid Connect launch<sup>8</sup>. There was no specific requirement for consortia to undertake a political economy and context analysis as part of the co-creation phase, though some did<sup>9</sup>. However, the timing of the co-creation phase meant that this analysis did not inform the composition of consortia, which had already occurred at the application phase. Consortia also found that the start-stop nature of the funding (due

<sup>5</sup> Carter, 2017. See also Bond and TPI, 2021b.

<sup>6</sup> See responses from nine of the consortia leads in an unpublished survey commissioned by Bond through the Cross-Consortia Aid Connect (CCAC) Leads Group in March 2020.

<sup>7</sup> <https://twpcommunity.org>

<sup>8</sup> For example, for an account of the debate, including discussions taking place within DFID around SMART rules, see Shutt, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> For example, the ECID consortium's [Gender, Inclusion, Power and Politics tool](#) and the Inclusion Works consortium's [Labour Market Assessments](#).

to initial delays between co-creation and implementation, and two rounds of budget cuts) limited opportunities for deeper engagement with and continuous monitoring of rapidly changing contexts. Consortia also felt the co-creation phase was too focused on programme design and reporting, with not enough of a focus on relationship-building and capacity strengthening in critical areas such as consortia governance, adaptive programming and gender equality and social inclusion (GESI)-sensitive programming, though funding and flexibility on the use of this funding was provided by the FCDO.

UK Aid Connect did not prescribe a specific results framework for consortia, but allowed consortia the flexibility to develop a framework tailored to their programme design. However, while some consortia achieved this (for example, the Smart Peace consortia's 'change frames') others adopted more traditional accountability mechanisms and approaches to VfM (see also Lesson 5 below) more suited to simpler programme designs. This indicates that future programmes may benefit from the inclusion of capacity development support for consortia in relation to accountability mechanisms such as results frameworks. In contrast, many of the approaches put in place by consortia were state of the art when it came to supporting learning and adaptation.

### Recommendations on more effective funding models for complex consortia

1. ***Make funding models less vulnerable to strategy and political change:*** Donors should consider grounding funds for consortia either in sustainable country/regional programmes, enduring policy sectors, or as centrally funded open (rather than thematic) calls that foreground adaptive collaboration to address complex challenges. Any risk assessment to inform such programmes should consider the potential insecurities associated with the funder's own context, with strategies in place to mitigate these risks.
2. ***Provide funding and capacity development support for context-sensitive consortium formation from the application stage:*** Time and support are needed to enable applicants to establish relationships and appropriate governance mechanisms, as well as to consider the composition and configuration of consortia in response to contexts, right from the start. Donors funding consortia might like to consider seed-funding to support capacity development and consortia-building prior to application processes. Such seed-funding might be targeted to key organisations (registered in priority LMIC countries) to form consortia to undertake in-depth context and stakeholder analyses and co-design programmes for further funding. This could be supplemented with outreach and networking activities, for example, regional or national 'agenda-setting panels', 'engagement events' and 'innovation labs'.
3. ***Develop funding mechanisms and management tools that enable consortia to think and work politically, responding to context and learning and adapting:*** Proven approaches that would be suitable for complex programmes aiming to contribute to sustainable systemic change include unrestricted funding for political economy analysis both as part of targeted seed-funding prior to the funding call (to ensure that the membership of consortia responds to appropriate contexts) and as part of co-creation (to ensure that consortia understand and engage with national/sub-national/supra-national systems), and results frameworks with flexible, qualitative indicators.
4. ***Maintain a co-creation phase for participatory programme design:*** This should include support around establishing comprehensive and adaptive work-plans with budgets, results frameworks, risk matrices and communication strategies suited to programmes that anticipate complex change pathways with unpredictable results. Contingency planning and responsible closure should be considered at this stage.
5. ***Integrate learning mechanisms from the start:*** Wrap-around learning programmes should be in place from the outset to ensure consistent support throughout the programme, as well as the generation of robust and responsible evidence for accountability, improving practice and contributing to knowledge.

## 6. Make sure new funding mechanisms are accompanied by adequate capacity development support:

Funder assessments of different instruments need to consider all associated costs. These not only include the transfer of management costs to contractors and grantees, but also the new capacity needs associated with the funder being able to support new models effectively (including adequate resourcing and relevant training).

### Lesson 2: Innovation

*Power dynamics, challenging political contexts and time constraints make it difficult for well-intentioned funders to develop frameworks that support both planned and spontaneous innovation.*

The idea presented in the business case that supporting diverse actors to work together in consortia would nurture planned and spontaneous innovation was well supported by the wider literature on innovation<sup>10</sup>. As per the programme's original results framework, planned innovations included 'new public goods' and communicative resources, as well as trying out new approaches to participatory governance, community engagement and gender equality and social inclusion, robust and responsible research and learning mechanisms, and influential communication strategies. The UK Aid Connect consortia also reported examples of successful 'pivots' in response to budget cuts and Covid-19<sup>11</sup>.

As these case studies of UK Aid Connect consortia experiences show<sup>12</sup>, factors identified as having helped consortia to adapt innovatively to these unexpected shocks included some that demonstrate the potential added value or 'collaborative advantage' of consortia over single organisations. Diversity in the skills and experience of members and the involvement of members accustomed to responding to disruption in humanitarian contexts were mentioned. Additionally, consortia cited cultures of openness, collaboration and learning, together with donor support, as being important for innovation in adaptation.

The experience of the UK Aid Connect consortia and the broader literature also offer insights into the challenges donors face in supporting sustained (and sustainable) innovation processes<sup>13</sup>. While supporting innovative adaptation in the context of disruption caused by short-term shocks worked well, enabling consortia to develop more considered and planned innovation is much more difficult.

Planned innovation tends to work best with stable and long-term funding models that are underpinned by an appetite for risk. Ideation, testing, learning from failure, and adaptation phases are unpredictable, and it can take a long time to achieve proof of concept, diffuse ideas and scale up or out<sup>14</sup>. Successful innovation relies on funders being able to overcome the power dynamics that shape donor-recipient relationships and create trust and space for consortia to report on learning from failure<sup>15</sup>. Evidence suggests<sup>16</sup> some members based in LMICs may be conditioned to reporting success and might find it difficult to adjust to these new and adaptive approaches to aid management.

Relating to earlier points regarding the importance of context, planned innovation needs to consider the political and ethical implications of seeking to support innovation in complex aid recipient

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<sup>10</sup> For example, see: Fagerberg, 2006; Newman, 2019; Kline et al., 1986; Edwards et al., 2018; Kris et al., 2013; and Klerkx and Aarts, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> See Delichte, 2021a.

<sup>12</sup> For further examples and analysis of adaptation by the UK Aid Connect consortia, see Delichte, 2021b.

<sup>13</sup> For example, see Fagerberg, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Newman, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Edwards et al., 2018

<sup>16</sup> Booth, 2018.

contexts<sup>17</sup> and how best to work with existing national innovation systems to ensure these are strengthened and not undermined. Some consortia reported that initial conceptualisations of innovation as value-neutral by the funders and some consortium members resulted in time-consuming negotiations around ethics.

These various experiences of consortia and evidence from the wider field indicate that funders need to make a clearer distinction between supporting consortia to adapt innovatively and planned innovation, as the latter is extremely vulnerable to the kinds of bureaucratic delays in funding approval and changes to the overall timeframe that faced UK Aid Connect consortia.

#### Recommendations for improving donor frameworks to support consortia innovation

1. *Distinguish between models for planned innovation and supporting innovative adaptation:* Supporting innovative adaptation requires flexibility on the part of funders and strong communication and engagement with contractors or grantees to support their efforts to be innovative in the face of unexpected disruptions. However, quite different approaches are needed for planned innovation. This requires long-term and flexible support that creates space for ideation and rewards learning from failure, for example through using the management tools detailed below.
2. *Develop and encourage the use of more flexible management tools that recognise risk, reward learning and see adjusting to failure as success:* Funders should be aware that delays are likely to impede planned innovation processes and that rapid, iterative decision making or adaptation can be undermined by complex approval processes and funding delays. Additionally they need to embrace risk, for example through the use of results frameworks, including indicators that measure the quality of evidence or learning-based decisions to drop unsuccessful innovations over more tangible 'successful' results.
3. *Consider the ethics of innovation:* Innovation is not value-neutral, and funders should ensure that consortia's context analysis considers whether contexts are appropriate for innovation driven by external actors, as well as how the proposed innovation interacts with existing national or regional innovation systems. Other considerations, such as the negotiation of intellectual property are important, as they may sit in tension with funder practices and require adaptation.

### Lesson 3: Gender equality

*Finding frameworks and management approaches that enable donors to implement their espoused commitments to gender and social inclusion remains a challenge.*

Of all the mandated competencies that potential consortia were required to evidence in their applications, a capacity to meet stated commitments to gender equality was the only one underpinned by legislation. Consortia applications were expected to comply with The UK International Development (Gender Equality) Act 2014 and give due consideration to Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) in all activities. Despite this, at the application stage, there was – as evidence shows is common in such situations<sup>18</sup> – a mismatch between the potential importance of meeting this legal/statutory duty and the actual weighting assigned to the assessment criteria for 'gender equality'. Gender equality was set at 5% (on par with 'beneficiary engagement' and significantly lower than 'consortia working', 'innovation', and value for money).

Moreover, in the UK Aid Connect business case and application terms of reference, 'gender' was conflated with 'women and girls', undermining the broader call's recognition of intersectionality, and the recognition of LGBTQI+ groups. The overarching results framework did not refer at all to gender and only included 'sex' as a disaggregation of development indicators. Several consortia noted in the

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Newman, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> See Longwe, 1997; Mukhopadhyay, 2004; de Jong, 2016.

Gender ‘community of practice’ discussions that gender equality has historically been reduced to ‘parity’ rather than a more profound consideration of relational inequality, and this perspective was also implied by the original UK Aid Connect Results Framework. Consortia stressed the importance of establishing a common understanding of the relational and intersectional nature of gender equality that was consistent across funders and consortia, while also noting the importance of the space and funding provided within UK Aid Connect for consortia to co-produce their own contextually responsive GESI approaches as part of both consortia-formation and programme design (see [practitioners’ guide](#) for further details).

The framing of GESI in the UK Aid Connect Business Case could be further developed to encourage consortia to move beyond gender parity and support a greater emphasis on practically integrating transformative approaches. In addition, higher weighting in the application assessment criteria would enable organisations to invest more time on GESI-related forward planning, during proposal and co-creation, without fear of losing funding opportunities during a period where organisations feel extremely pressurised and with stretched capacity. In the ‘community of practice’ meetings evidence was provided that some consortia were successful in developing more nuanced and embedded approaches to gender<sup>19</sup>. They dedicated time to designing substantial GESI frameworks, which responded to the specific challenges of their programme contexts. Where GESI strategy was incorporated into planning and accountability mechanisms there was a greater likelihood that gender would remain a priority in the face of cuts. It would be beneficial if this approach could be replicated, adapted and supported.

However, the lack of specificity/clarity around the meaning of ‘gender’ further exacerbated by the absence of any reference to gender equality beyond disaggregation by ‘sex’ in the original results framework and quarterly reporting templates influenced the approach adopted by some consortia. This suggests both the need for funders to promote an explicit conceptualisation of gender equality but also for consortia to ensure that they have the capacity to implement such an approach across their programme. The language of ‘statutory duties’ enshrined in law was not matched by how GESI commitments were framed in either the application or subsequent review processes, with the result that commitments to ‘gender transformative environments’ made by some of the consortia in line with the ambitions associated with the statutory duty, were then not matched with a clear plan on how to achieve this and/or what ‘transformative’ would look like in practice.

Several consortia with an explicit gender focus were also terminated early, adding to concerns expressed in the gender ‘community of practice’ that donor frameworks and support for consortia need strengthening if they are to live up to expectations set out in legislation.

#### Recommendations for improving donor frameworks to support gender equality

1. *Ensure the weighting given to screening gender capacity and plans complies with statutory duties outlined in law, such as the International Development (Gender Equality) Act 2014:* This should be proportionate to other assessment criteria. It also means ensuring appropriate expertise on the funder assessment team and providing sufficient resources to support consortia to develop shared understandings and design gender-equitable programmes. Appropriate co-produced indicators should be included in planning and accountability mechanisms, with learning around GESI explicitly linked to the Value for Money of consortia.
2. *Develop frameworks and language that extends understandings of gender beyond ‘women and girls’:* Equality is relational and must mean more than simple disaggregation of data by sex. Donors need to encourage more culturally sensitive analysis and nuanced indicators if consortia are to develop and implement more sophisticated understandings of gender and inclusion. These need to acknowledge intersectionality, be contextually sensitive and engage with a foundational assumption: achieving gender equality will require longer-term attitudinal and behavioural shifts.

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<sup>19</sup> For example, [ECID’s approach to GESI](#)

3. ***Support GESI capacity development to enable consortia to implement frameworks and comply with legal requirements:*** As well as assessing applicants on their capacity and the inclusivity of internal structures and external relationships (which implies the need for funders themselves to have sufficient GESI capacity), funders must provide ongoing support if they are to overcome reliance on a few providers or contractors known for quality work on gender. This cannot be in the form of occasional training. The 2018 safeguarding crisis highlights the need for development organisations based in the Global North and South to significantly develop their capacities in this area. Therefore, accompaniment support, such as that provided by the wrap-around Learning from Consortia should cover the entire funded period. Such support should challenge consortia to continuously engage with GESI issues and prioritise learning on how different members of consortia understand, and respond to, GESI-related challenges.

## Lesson 4: Community engagement

*Loose terminology and weak donor incentives are potential barriers to consortia supporting meaningful local ownership and participation by communities as well as other stakeholders.*

The business case placed prominence on ‘beneficiary feedback’ as a feature of programme success and highlighted beneficiary participation as crucial for adaptive programming, innovation, GESI, risk and results<sup>20</sup>. However, when it came to screening applicants, despite its re-framing as ‘beneficiary engagement’, the assessment criteria had a narrower focus on listening and responding, which neglected the original emphasis on meaningful participation in decision making. Guidance also placed little emphasis on robust stakeholder analyses at the consortia-formation phase or on developing meaningful indicators by which consortia would be held accountable for this.

Many UK Aid Connect consortia implemented a wide range of innovative and responsible community and local stakeholder feedback initiatives<sup>21</sup>. Some consortia also agreed that a consortia approach enhanced their understanding of contexts and helped to identify new stakeholders. Consortia also noted that where relationships with local organisations already existed (or where they were intended to extend beyond the lifeline of the UK Aid Connect programme) it was far easier to weather programme closures responsibly and find ways of continuing valuable activities. However, few consortia involved local stakeholders in programme design and decision making.

FCDO provided considerable funding to support programmes to close in a responsible way. However, the severe implications of budget cuts and programme closures on community members that consortia recounted during the community engagement ‘community of practice’ discussions once again highlights the importance of donors providing more comprehensive guidance on equitable and ethical engagement around responsible programme closure. Section 4G of the practitioners’ guide, ‘Transitioning and Sustaining Value’ offers further learning around navigating closures).

Sudden programme closures also draw attention to the inappropriateness of using the term ‘beneficiary’ with regards to different stakeholders in aid-recipient countries. Civil society organisations (CSOs), public servants and citizens all stand to benefit from responsible and well-managed aid programmes that enable them to collaborate to solve local problems. Such collaborations rely on trusting relationships, and as UK Aid Connect consortia experience shows, rapid withdrawal of donor funds without responsible engagement can tarnish reputations and relations.

Recommendations for donors wanting to support consortia to implement frameworks for meaningful and responsible local ownership and participation

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<sup>20</sup> FCDO’s Beneficiary engagement smart guide (2019) defines beneficiaries as ‘the people whose lives we are trying to improve. Direct beneficiaries are people who take part or are otherwise immediately involved in programme activities. Indirect beneficiaries are the people whose lives we are ultimately trying to improve, even if we are not working with them directly.’ The guide also notes that it is ultimately the Senior Responsible Owner (SRO)’s responsibility to determine what beneficiary engagement is suitable and feasible for a programme.

<sup>21</sup> See Bond and TPI, 2021a; and Bond and TPI, 2021c.

1. *Review and adopt appropriate language for local ownership and participation in all stages of programme cycles:* 'Beneficiaries' is a contested term and civil society and actors should be consulted to achieve consensus around suitable alternatives. The [Learning from Consortia publication on community engagement](#) illustrates that many programme designs and operating models, such as those used by UK Aid Connect consortia, involve supporting the collaboration and capacity development of diverse sets of actors: ordinary citizens, public servants, service providers, traditional leaders, government officials, politicians, and so on<sup>22</sup>. Terms used in donor frameworks need to reflect this diversity.
2. *Ensure a commitment to meaningful local participation and community engagement is articulated during co-creation and in planning and accountability mechanisms:* Donors should require consortia to include indicators they will use to hold themselves to account for their commitment to community and local ownership in results frameworks. These should include details of how they will measure and know they have achieved their desired levels of participation and ownership. All members of consortia should be involved in their formulation.
3. *Ensure consortia funding models include contingency funding and guidance around expectation management and responsible closure from the start of the programme to mitigate harm:* Funding uncertainty may jeopardise relationships between various stakeholders and the future willingness of communities to engage in aid-funded programmes. Therefore, funders should budget for longer-term transitional funding to consortia that report a breach in their duty-of-care to local stakeholders, particularly vulnerable groups who are at most risk of harm due to programme closures. This would allow continued oversight and protective measures to be triggered if needed. Meaningful guidance to support responsible programme closure should also be provided and addressed as a key component of planning/capacity-building during co-creation.

## Lesson 5: Value for Money

*Standard Value for Money (VfM) frameworks need to be adapted to enable donors to test their assumptions on the potential added value delivered by the consortium.*

Both the business case and application assessment criteria put significant emphasis on VfM<sup>23</sup>. One of the aims of UK Aid Connect was to test the value proposition that consortia could generate better VfM than single organisations. This related to assumptions both about the model delivering management savings for DFID, and about the potential of consortia to test innovations, learn, adapt and achieve economies of scale.

Despite the significance of the value proposition and the lack of evidence on the VfM of consortia, FCDO frameworks made no reference to using VfM thinking to assess the added value of consortia.<sup>24</sup> The Business Case and Terms of Reference for applications proposed fairly standard approaches to assessing VfM in procurement and delivery. They both suggested VfM would be assessed on the basis of analysing cost drivers and claims about the economy, efficiency, effectiveness and equity of proposed interventions. One remarkable difference was DFID-FCDO's new emphasis on equity as a cross cutting concept to be integrated with other VfM concepts at all levels of the results chain.

Additionally, the language used in the Business Case and VfM training provided by FCDO did not reflect the adaptive approaches consortia were taking to their work. Rather, they suggested consortia would be delivering quite predictable outputs and outcomes. This was despite recommendations from the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) and others, such as the Institute of Innovation for

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<sup>22</sup> See Bond and TPI, 2021a (p6).

<sup>23</sup> Evidence taken from terms of reference for UK Aid Connect.

<sup>24</sup> Evidence taken from business case, and triangulated with ICAI

Public Purpose, on the relevance of such approaches in complex, unpredictable programmes involving diverse groups with 'transformational' aims<sup>25</sup>.

FCDO provided consortia with the freedom to take creative approaches to assessing and demonstrating VfM. One consortia lead, that was perhaps an exception to the rule, chose VfM indicators it found useful. It also involved other members in conversations on how to reflect some of the implications of the consortium model in its VfM approach<sup>26</sup>. Yet conversations with the lead members from a selection of the other consortia and a review of documentation<sup>27</sup> suggested most approaches were driven by the need to comply with DFID/FCDO's accountability demands. Our limited research revealed no examples of VfM being used for inclusive learning on the added value of the consortia model, nor any evidence of if and how this was enabling consortia to improve VfM over time. Despite good practice examples of consortia trying to integrate equity meaningfully in VfM frameworks, some of the UK Aid Connect consortia, like others in the sector, tended to struggle to apply FCDO's '5e' VfM framework in their reporting to FCDO<sup>28</sup>.

Some challenges experienced by consortia might have been mitigated had the planned LFP practice programme accompanied FCDO and consortia in developing VfM frameworks to assess the added value of consortia from the start. By the time the VfM LFP theme got going it was difficult to shape the consortia VfM frameworks already in place to properly test the consortium model value proposition. Therefore the LFP started to work with consortia on developing consortia specific VfM frameworks for future use instead.

Conversations in the VfM community of practice suggest that developing a VfM framework tailored for testing assumptions on the collaborative advantage of consortia could generate useful learning on value creation. Consortia shared insights relating to how some collaborations enhanced approaches to equity and social inclusion. Others talked about consortia models presenting trade-offs between equity and efficiency. A single organisation model might achieve effectiveness quite quickly; however, consortia comprising members with expertise in GESI would produce better quality equity outcomes, albeit more slowly. During these discussions, consortia identified different kinds of collaborative advantages that mapped neatly onto FCDO's VfM framework and are elaborated in the practitioners' guide.

Encouraging consortia to talk about VfM issues that directly related to the consortia model also provided opportunities to discuss investments and costs. These included possible inefficiencies, such as the risks of consortia comprised of very similar organisations duplicating effort. Likewise, it gave them permission to discuss the knock-on effects of FCDO 'saving' money by procuring and managing consortia rather than single organisations. Such decisions by funders are significant drivers of both financial and non-financial costs incurred by lead members of consortia. In this instance, consortia members were typically taking on responsibilities and risks that had formerly been DFID's role, managing messy relationships with consortia members and partners. And these relationships became even more complicated with each round of budget cuts<sup>29</sup>. While FCDO's Non Attributable Costs Policy that aims to cover such costs, may have helped in this instance, the early closure of the LFC meant we were unable to explore this. In addition, sudden cuts not only created inefficiencies in terms of time

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<sup>25</sup> ICAI, 2018; ICAI, 2019; IIPP policy briefs and working papers; Gibby 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Interviews.

<sup>27</sup> First LFC meeting, interviews and analysis of frameworks.

<sup>28</sup> This draws from the academic and thematic advisors' extensive experience researching and working on VfM as well as their engagement with UK Aid Connect consortia; it was also the reason for the 12/1/2021 FCDO presentation on VfM.

<sup>29</sup> Several lead members commented on the high transaction costs they incurred managing the programme.

taken to rework budgets. They also led to earlier mentioned reputational risks for consortia members and their partners<sup>30</sup>.

#### Recommendations for donors wanting to support consortia in implementing frameworks to learn about the potential VfM of the consortium model

1. **Ensure fit-for-purpose approaches to learning about VfM in consortia from the start.** VfM is an inherently ambiguous and subjective concept. It is most useful for driving value creation when the definition and assumptions on how a model will achieve VfM are contextualised and VfM tools are developed to support learning and adaptation during implementation. In the context of consortia, VfM must be defined and assessed in inclusive ways that relate to assumptions about the collaborative advantage of any particular consortia composition. These might relate to achieving greater equity or more efficiency, for example, and are elaborated in the accompanying practitioners' guide alongside detailed discussions of the added costs (financial and non-financial) associated with consortia working.
2. **Encourage potential consortia members to discuss their assumptions about the added value associated with their collaboration right from the start.** There is no guarantee that consortia working will create more value than single organisational models. Therefore discussions about the potential collaborative advantage and additional investments required for effective consortia working must take place before co-creation. Making these assumptions explicit right from the start will provide the basis for monitoring, learning and adapting consortia composition and resource allocations to increase value for money during implementation.
3. **Test funder assumptions about the VfM of procurement savings using models that factor in the additional costs for consortia leads.** Passing on management costs to contractors may save funders money, but such decisions are significant cost drivers for consortia. It is important that the full effects of these and the extent to which donor policies, such as FCDO's Non Project Attributable Costs offset them, are monitored carefully and transparently.

## Conclusions

Despite the significant challenges affecting implementation, the UK Aid Connect programme was exemplary in its commitment to exploring the potential of a civil society-led consortia approach to evidence-informed innovation and learning. While the evidence generated through the Learning from Consortia programme was insufficient to assess the added value of consortia, it has informed a new approach to understanding and assessing collaborative advantage as part of the partnership process. Since the literature is clear that collaboration across countries, sectors and disciplines is essential for any meaningful response to complex global challenges<sup>31</sup>, there remains an urgent need for further commitment and investment in developing an inclusive collaborative infrastructure and further support for practice-based learning into the conditions that enable collaborations to add value. This review has offered some initial lessons and recommendations to start this conversation.

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<sup>30</sup> Discussions during final thematic 'community of practice' sessions.

<sup>31</sup> See Bond and TPI, 2021b.

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