Submission to the International Development Select Committee Inquiry on SDG16 – promoting peace, justice and inclusive institutions
Rethinking UK support to politically fragile democracies

Global Research Network on Parliaments and People

1. Executive summary and recommendations

1.1. UK government has an understandable reluctance to invest bilaterally in developing strong political institutions in countries where government commitment to inclusion and decentralized democracy is weak. However, in such countries there is huge value in investing in individuals and organisations able to produce knowledge and scrutinize politics. Prioritising investment in national research opportunities, and co-operation within civil society, is critically important to SDG16 and deserves far more attention.

1.2. Historically UK-funded international research programmes have been dominated by UK (and other European) institutions, even when the research is taking place in the global south. This has partly been justified by claims of 'lack of capacity' and corruption in the regions of the world that receive development and aid funding. But, there is growing evidence that researchers in these regions have talent, ability, knowledge, skills, and probity, even if their institutions are resource-starved, so providing opportunities for them pays dividends.

1.3. We recommend that the UK government increases its investment into research organisations (ROs) and scholars in politically fragile countries (e.g., through the Global Challenges Research Fund [GCRF]), with a larger number of global south scholars acting as Principal Investigators and an increased proportion of funding for ROs in the global south.

1.4. The amount received by scholars in the global south who have fewer opportunities (e.g., women, early career, from ethnic minorities, from arts/humanities/social science disciplines) should also be increased. These proportions should be monitored to ensure progress is made. Strategies for the prevention of corruption should be detailed, tailored to context and have financial capacity development embedded throughout.

1.5. Some ROs in the global south already have the capacity to disburse grants competitively to scholars in their institution or even country (e.g., Setaweet Movement and Mekelle University in Ethiopia and Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation in Myanmar). The UK government could invest directly in them or via UK universities (e.g., as they do via the GCRF Network Plus programmes) to expand support to national-led research in the global south.

1.6. International collaboration can be useful in the global south but the value of global north organisations should be evaluated and reviewed rather than assumed. Lessons about more equitable partnerships should be learned, exchanged and embedded into funding calls. UK universities should be given incentives to recognize the intellectual property rights of global south scholars and support their leadership in research partnerships and coalitions.

2. International research partnerships between global south and north

2.1. SOAS, ranked 3rd university in the world in 2019 for its contribution to SDG16, has been demonstrating the value of more equitable partnerships through various innovative coalitions and programmes. In this submission we offer evidence of this capacity from the

experience of the [Global Research Network on Parliaments and People](#), especially from two countries that play important roles in UK aid and assistance: Myanmar and Ethiopia.

2.2. It is important to provide spaces for open discussion between scholars in the global south and north to freely discuss the issues surrounding international collaborative research. SOAS recently hosted a conference ('[Applying a decolonial lens to research structures, practices and norms in higher education](#)') between UK funders, research offices, and researchers from both the global south and north to discuss the complex pressures, choices and trade-offs. This is being followed up by a seminar series co-organised by SOAS and Oxford University ('[Research for Development](#)'), which aims to open the discussion globally about the many challenges involved with international research coalitions. All events are to be live streamed and made openly accessible to enable as many perspectives to be heard as possible.

2.3. Currently Research England has incentivized UK HEIs to engage with global research through the QR GCRF. However, there is as yet no real incentive to encourage UK HEIs to enable development research to be led by our global south partners and investigators. For example, the REF exercise rewards the amount of research income an UK university receives but there are no rewards for flowing funds to our international partners on an equitable footing as UK HEIs cannot count this as their research income.

2.4. Another discrepancy is that the current QR GCRF allocation is determined by the amount of QR funding each UK HEI receives. There is little attention paid to the amount of income flowing to our global south partners or the pre-existing relationships of UK HEIs with researchers in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific. Take SOAS for example: in 18/19 c.60% of our total awarded research volume is dealing with GCRF and ODA compliant research. Indeed, a full 75% of our total research award volume focuses on DAC Countries and yet of the total QR GCRF allocated SOAS receives 0.36% (£0.2m) compared to the highest of 8.2% awarded to UCL (£4.7m). This creates further inequality within UK HEIs. Ideally there should be some recognition of UK HEIs who are genuinely supporting equitable partnerships internationally (e.g. by looking at proportion of institutional funding focusing on DAC list country partnerships and research or through the proportion of funding flowing to the global south through the UK HEI).

3. **Global Research Network on Parliaments and People investing in research**

3.1. In 2017 The Global Research Network on Parliaments and People was established with funding from the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and Global Challenges Research Fund. SOAS co-ordinates the network in partnership with the University of Leeds, Hansard Society (London), JNU (New Delhi), Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation (EMReF, Yangon), Forum for Social Studies (Addis Ababa) and Setaweet (Addis Ababa). The aim is to create opportunities for national scholars to research the relationship between politicians and actors/organisations in society in Ethiopia and Myanmar.

3.2. GRNPP has awarded 46 grants to scholars and artists across both countries in an open competitive process where the research was designed entirely by applicants. 42/46 grants were awarded to Ethiopian or Myanmar Principal Investigators (and their teams), and men/women as well as different ethnic groups and early career researchers were well-represented among the successful applicants. They won these project grants against a total of 155 applications (including from Europe) entirely on merit. SOAS and partners have provided a range of services (guidance, training, mentoring, peer-to-peer support, financial management) to work towards equality of opportunity.

4. Examples of research organisations that GRNPP has funded

4.1. Most of the [research projects](#) funded by GRNPP are on-going, so it is too early to assess impact, but it is already clear that they are of an extremely high quality and in most cases have the potential for significant impact on SDG16. If the IDSC inquiry on SDG16 is re-established after the UK General Election, we would like to report more fully on the importance of this research to peace, justice and inclusive institutions. In the meantime, we will highlight a few examples from research organisations (ROs) we have funded:

4.2. Jeepyah Civil Society Development Organization's[1] (JCSDO) experience of working on SDG16 is that:

    4.2.1. Reducing violence and death rates (16.1 & 16.2) will only be possible by investing more significantly in local level organisations working on women's and children's rights. More action is needed in Myanmar to address the severe drug addiction crisis; tackling the taboo on discussion of sex and the stigma of being a survivor of sexual violence; improving capacity of the police to serve the community; and reducing corruption in the law enforcement agencies and legal system.

    4.2.2. Strengthening institutions (16.6 & 16.7) will mean addressing both corruption and gender inequality. The urgent issues are better representation for women in political institutions, enhancing oversight mechanisms; stronger role for civil society in influencing parliaments; and a change in the constitution (to abolish to the military's automatic right to 1/3 of the seats in parliament).

4.3. Chinbridge Institute's[2] observations and recommendations on SDG16 are:

    4.3.1. The main challenges to achieving this SDG are youth disengagement (e.g., only ¼ of Chin youth aged 18-34 years old voted in the last 8 years); neither the public nor MPs are well-informed about the role of elected representatives; civil society in Chin state lacks funding and capacity; legal restrictions on public engagement in politics and lack of transparency (e.g., about budgets).

    4.3.2. International aid prioritises development above democracy; however, the UK government should focus on deepening democracy by: (a) investing in preparing citizens to be better informed, active, responsible and thoughtful so that they can share control of government and drive the society toward a deepened democratic society; (b) strengthening the capacity of MPs, CSOs and local NGOs for a wider, more inclusive and meaningful citizens' participation in democratic decision-making; (c) funding scholars and the media so that the public and policy-makers have more accurate, focused, reliable and easily accessible information.

4.4. Various scholars in Ethiopia have pointed out that the prevailing top-down attitude to promoting peace, justice and inclusive institutions by donors is counter-productive.

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[1] JCSDO is a community-based CSO working in Mon state in southeastern Myanmar, founded after the civil war. Their goals are to help communities in former conflict zones to become peaceful, stable, and be able to participate actively in politics and democracy. They provide services in rural communities, such as computer skills training, civic engagement support, legal advice, organizing women's groups, negotiating with police and village leaders about the management of violence against women, natural disaster emergency relief, and engaging women and youth in political leadership.

[2] Chinbridge Institute is a research and learning centre in Chin state, Myanmar, aiming to produce reliable information to account for the past, direct the present, and shape the future. It was founded in 2017 to fill the gaps in civic education and research. With GRNPP's financial and technical support, Chinbridge Institute researched 'Understanding Political Representation and Participation in Chin State.' They are working against corruption and for good governance research and education to enable a wider, more inclusive and meaningful citizens' participation in political processes.

Deepening democracy requires a combination of attention to enhancing the capacity of individual leaders (members of parliament, judges, civil servants), key political and justice institutions (parliament, the judiciary, local government, law enforcements agencies), and strengthening political participation. But strong 'capacity' is highly contested and participation is no guarantee for inclusion.

4.5. Within Ethiopia GRNPP funded scholars and artists have designed and managed inter-disciplinary research that is generating evidence of the chronic political exclusion of various groups – women, youth, pastoralists, ethnic groups with small populations, and people on the borders and periphery (internally and externally; that is, at local, national and international levels). GRNPP scholars from ROs (including universities and CSOs) across the country are deepening our understanding about the relationships between the dominant and marginalized groups and actors within different localities.

4.6. In both Ethiopia and Myanmar the GRNPP funded scholars have developed their own networks to enable knowledge exchange and advocacy from researchers based across different parts of both countries. These emerged organically and are led nationally, thereby hugely improving their chances of sustainability and impact:

4.6.1. In Mynamar, our longer-established programme, Enlightened Myanmar Research Organization (EMReF) [3], in close collaboration with civil society leaders, has established the Alliance for Inclusive Democracy (AID) with the purpose of building Myanmar as an all-inclusive democratic state embracing the values of humanism. The AID has been built with those civil society leaders, MPs, political party leaders, religious leaders (Christians, Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists), scholars and artists who uphold democratic and humanist values. The CSO leaders are working on thematic areas like human rights, peace, justice, gender and environment. AID has gathered twice so far (February and October 2019): in the 1st meeting they mainly discussed the meaning of inclusiveness and the barriers if being inclusive in Myanmar, with core members of AID paying significant attention to all-inclusiveness including Rohingyas. In the 2nd AID meeting they focused on the common values on which Myanmar as a nation wants to be built, reflecting on the causes of declining values of Myanmar society and ways of revitalizing ethics. The Myanmar State, in the name of sovereignty, has been trying to control all the power of the executive, judiciary, legislating and centralized political governance. In the name of unity, the government continuously builds a unitary State using the tools of Burmanization (Bamar supremacy) and Buddhisnization. Myanmar society has so far lacked the possibility of emphasizing the common values between and among various ethnic and religious groups, rather than those of each group or culture. The AID meeting reflected that it is fundamental that Myanmar has to embrace the values of common humanity, justice, equality, and freedom as the values of nation building in order to work towards a peaceful federal democracy.

4.6.2. In Ethiopia, GRNPP-funded scholars, mainly from universities across the country as well as a small number of CSOs, formed a new network to exchange knowledge in November 2019. Committed to egalitarianism, and finding common causes across ethnic groups and geo-political areas, this group will embark on joint publications and policy influencing to counter hate and promote peace and justice.

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[3] Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation (EMReF) is an independent non-profit research institution working for development of evidence-based policy making and revitalization of independent research culture in Myanmar. They place a particular focus on supporting the strengthening of national and state legislatures.

4.7. This nationally-led research, networking and advocacy has the potential to contribute to processes that could enhance the prospects for peace in countries that are severely threatened by internal widespread violence and displacement. UK should increase investment in action research by national and local research organisations that enhance understanding of how excluded groups conceive of democracy and the role they can play in peace-building.

5. Other research by national scholars

5.1. GRNPP has no monopoly on significant research. Other research projects relevant to SDG16 have been pointed out by GRNPP members. Progress on SDG16 depends on collaboration rather than competition across civil society, so donors (including UK government) should take care that their investments promote nationally-led co-operation. At present, donors are at times creating divisions rather than cohesion within civil society.

5.2. To give just two examples of national initiatives that are significant for SDG16:

5.2.1. Myanmar Alliance for Transparency and Accountability (MATA) published a report in September 2019 ('Does the mismanagement of resources cause corruption and resource curse?'). This report uncovered various key threats to SDG16 that the UK government should take account of. Various State-Owned Enterprises (SOE) have continuous budget deficits (e.g., state owned media) while the state produces inconsistent reports on mineral extraction in Myanmar. In 2014-2015 they reported inconsistencies between private sector companies and government statements in the jade extraction sector alone (the government under-reported payments by: $34m in cash, $75m in kind; production: $342m; sales: $361m). Injustices persist in (a) the significant ownership of businesses by the Myanmar military, and (b) international companies retaining unfair shares of companies (e.g., in the contract between China Nickel Mining Corporation (CNMC) and Myanmar Mining Corporation, where Myanmar gains only 1%).

5.2.2. EMReF facilitated a workshop in May 2019 for 85 CSOs and donor organisations to discuss their year-long research on inclusive peace. Diverse and conflicting views were found among the 112 participants but a consensus emerged. As far as the peace-making process is concerned, the Union Peace Conference (UPC) lack time and capacity to co-ordinate, the UPC technical team is not free and independent and lacks time, the Joint Monitoring Committee is not led by civilians, civil society is excluded from the peace process, there is a disconnection between decision-makers' negotiations and consultations with public, and 91% of the public do not see peace as a priority. Most seriously for the UK government, current donor policies weaken cohesion among CSOs in the country (both inside and outside Yangon), neglect regions outside Yangon and surrounding areas, focus too much on 'official' peace negotiations and not enough on CSO peace-promoting processes, and fail to recognize (or they even exploit) the expertise of CSO leaders. Their recommendations for donors (they have others for others groups) were: work with CSO to develop new requirements for funding; process applications faster and give feedback on failed applications; hold information sessions about funding in all states and regions; support CSO peace-promoting activities (including unregistered CSOs); add CSO representatives on committees that decide on funding; support nationally-led networks and others initiatives (rather than taking a leading role); fund more knowledge exchange between CSOs; and reward

those CSOs with a track record and aspiration for inter-CSO co-operation across states and regions.

The GRNPP research is at an early stage but it is already clear that further investment by the UK government in national researchers could make a significant contribution to SDG16. If the UK's IDC committee reinstates this inquiry, GNRPP would be delighted to submit more evidence on impact and facilitate oral evidence by leaders of the networks in Myanmar and Ethiopia.

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