

COVID-19 FUNDED RESEARCH PROJECTS IN FOCUS



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Key Findings:

Number of capacity strengthening projects:

38

Funding investments (known funding amounts):

\$133m

Top funder:

UKRI

Research capacity strengthening

The coronavirus pandemic has triggered an unprecedented global research response across multiple disciplines to gain insights into this novel infection and its impacts. To date, thousands of research activities have been embarked on with a predominance of research projects in higher income countries. Strengthening research capacity, particularly in low-resource settings, facilitates an equitable response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Research capacity strengthening activities are purposeful initiatives which enhance the ability of individuals, organisations and systems to successfully undertake research(1). Here, we present the scope of funded research activities with capacity strengthening as an objective, drawing on evidence from the first three-month update of the *Living Mapping Review (LMR) of COVID-19 funded research projects* and the UKCDR/GLOPID-R [COVID-19 Research Project Tracker](#).

Methodology

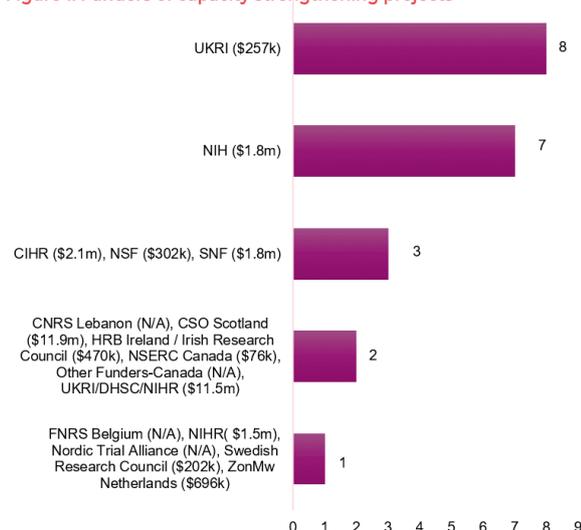
Descriptive and thematic analyses were done as outlined in the [LMR study protocol](#). Projects including a capacity strengthening component were identified and key funders, funding amounts, country distribution of projects, specific research focus and study populations were determined.

Findings

Locations, funders and funding amounts

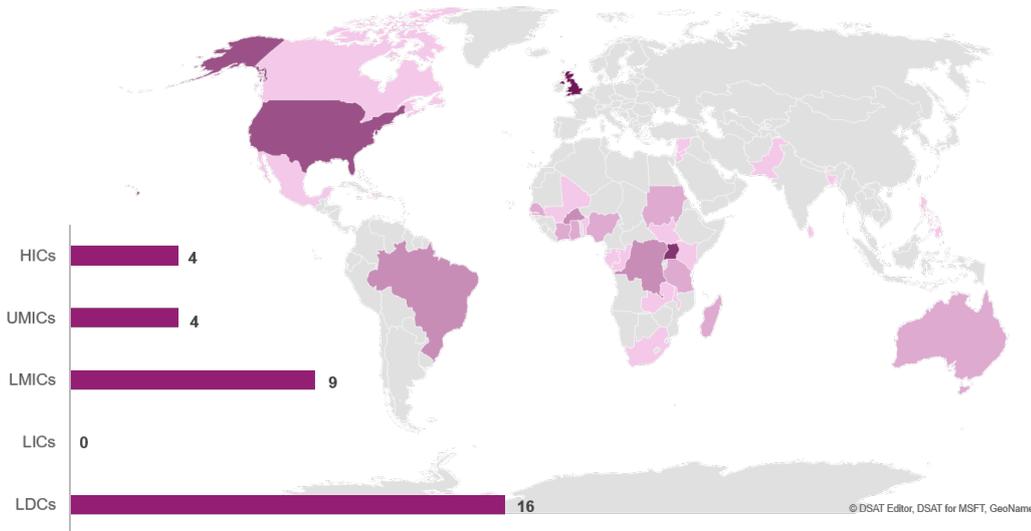
The 38 projects identified with a capacity strengthening objective are funded by 13 funders with a total investment of over \$133m as shown in Figure 1. However, \$101m of this amount was invested in one NIH vaccine site preparation project with sites in Sub-Saharan Africa and South America. UKRI funded the most projects (10 projects) and 9 projects are UK ODA-funded (\$9.1m invested). Figure 2 shows research projects involved at least one of 33 countries and several projects were collaborations between UK-based institutions and institutions in less-resourced countries. At least one of 16 least developed countries and 9 lower-middle-income countries were involved in research capacity strengthening projects with Uganda being involved in the most projects (6 projects).

Figure 1: Funders of capacity strengthening projects



*Known funding amounts included

Figure 2: Locations of capacity strengthening projects



NB: 5 projects with non-specific location details: Global (1), South America (1) and multiple countries in Africa (3)

Research focus and WHO research priorities

Most of the projects focussed on strengthening laboratory capacity in low-resource countries followed by strengthening capacity for COVID-19 management and surveillance as indicated in Table 1. It is therefore unsurprising that the majority of the projects fell under “virus: natural history, transmission and diagnostics”, “Epidemiological studies” and clinical “characterization and management” WHO research priority areas. Laboratory capacity strengthening activities were predominantly focussed on diagnostics. Some projects involved advanced laboratory procedures such as coronavirus manipulation and genomic sequencing whereas as other projects referred to laboratory capacity strengthening with no details (as shown in Figure 3).

Table 1: Area of focus for capacity strengthening projects

Area of capacity strengthening	No. of projects
Laboratory	20
Management	6
Surveillance	4
Data management	3
Clinical trials	3
Research training	3
Ethics and PPE innovation	1 project each

About the UKCDR/ GloPID-R Tracker

The UKCDR/GLOPID-R COVID-19 Research Project Tracker (the Tracker) is a live open access database which categorises COVID-19 research activity funded around the world against the WHO research priorities outlined in the WHO Coordinated Research Roadmap. COVID CIRCLE has initiated a Living Mapping Review of these projects, published in Wellcome Open Research, to support funders and researchers in the achievement of a coherent response to this pandemic.

For more on the Tracker and our work on COVID-19, visit: ukcdr.org.uk/covid-circle

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Figure 3: Area of focus of laboratory capacity strengthening projects



Some projects fall under more than one area

Discussion and conclusion

The prioritisation of laboratory research capacity strengthening activities in the first phase of this pandemic indicate the importance funders and researchers attach to these activities and their importance for an effective pandemic response. These capacity strengthening efforts should also promote preparedness for future pandemics.

Notes

Limitations of data and findings: Study protocol is outlined in Living Mapping Review of COVID-19 funded research projects. Analysis was limited by:

- o A lack of completeness of funding and/or qualitative data for some projects.
- o Tracker data is more likely to be derived from UKCDR and/or GloPID-R funders.
- o The absence of commercial research.

References

1. Enoch J. Health Research Capacity Strengthening: A UKCDS Mapping [Internet]. [cited 2020 Dec 1]. Available from: http://www.ukcds.org.uk/sites/default/files/content/resources/UKCDS_Health_Research_Capacity_Strengthening_Mapping.pdf