

COVID-19 FUNDED RESEARCH PROJECTS IN FOCUS



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Key Findings:

Number of capacity strengthening projects:

93

Funding investments (known funding amounts):

\$191.8m

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-resourced settings, facilitates an equitable response to the COVID-19 pandemic and is likely to be most effective when funded as part of preparedness. 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 within the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing on evidence from the nine-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

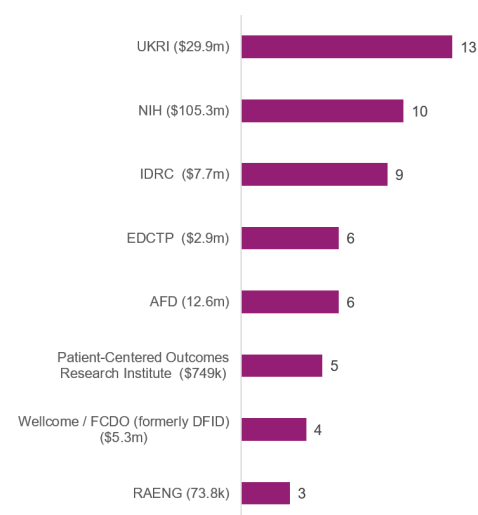
Descriptive and thematic analysis were done as outlined in the LMR study protocol. Projects with a capacity strengthening objective explicitly mentioned were identified (capacity strengthening at all levels - individual, institutional and national were included). Further funders, funding amounts, country distribution of projects and projects' specific research focus of projects were determined.

Findings

Locations, funders and funding amounts

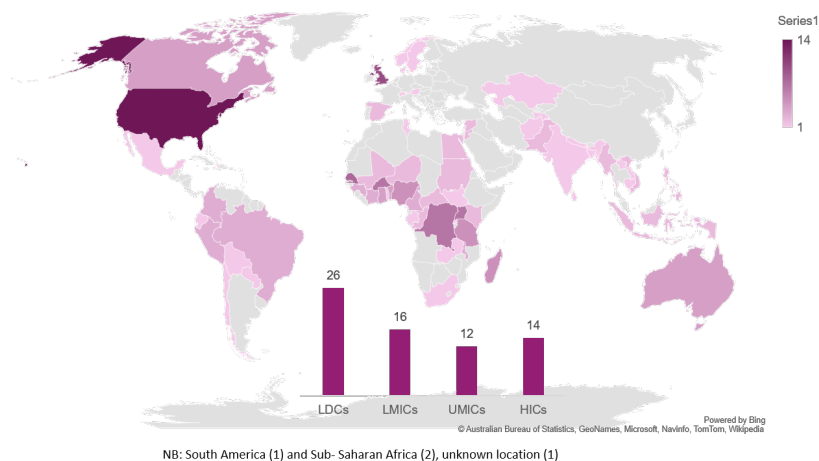
The 93 projects identified with a capacity strengthening objective are funded by 38 funders with a total investment of over \$191.8m as shown in Figure 1. However, \$101m of this amount was invested in one National Institutes of Health (NIH) vaccine site preparation project with sites in Sub-Saharan Africa and South America. UKRI funded the most projects (13 projects). Figure 2 shows research projects involved at least one of 68 countries and several projects were collaborations between UK- and US- based institutions and institutions in less-resourced countries. At least one of 26 least developed countries and 16 lower-middle-income countries were involved in research capacity strengthening projects with Uganda and Senegal being involved in the most projects (seven and eight projects respectively).

Figure 1: Funders of capacity strengthening projects (funders of 3 or more projects shown)



*Known funding amounts included

Figure 2: Locations of capacity strengthening projects



Research focus and WHO research priorities

Most of the projects focused on strengthening laboratory capacity in less-resourced 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” research priority areas. Laboratory capacity strengthening activities were predominantly focused 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.

Discussion and conclusion

The prioritisation of laboratory research capacity strengthening activities indicates the importance funders and researchers attach to these activities and their importance for an effective pandemic response.

Limiting the studies included in this analysis to only those mentioning research capacity strengthening implies some projects are likely to have been missed. Existing capacity leveraged for the response to this COVID-19 pandemic is also relevant to capacity strengthening and will also promote preparedness for future pandemics.

Table 1: Area of focus for capacity strengthening projects

Area of capacity strengthening	No. of projects
Laboratory	35
Clinical Management	14
Surveillance	11
Data management	8
Clinical trials	7
Research training	13
Policy response	3
Pandemic preparedness	7
Infection prevention	6
Ethical governance	1

Figure 3: Area of focus of laboratory capacity strengthening projects



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](#). The [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. The version of the tracker for the nine-month update (15th April, 2021) included 10,608 projects involving 142 countries with at least \$4.7billion invested by 201 funders.

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

This piece was developed by Emilia Antonio, Adrian Bucher & Alice Norton (and the Tracker team).

Get in touch
covid19@ukcdr.org.uk

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: <https://www.ukcdr.org.uk/resource/health-research-capacity-strengthening-2/>