

POLICY BRIEF

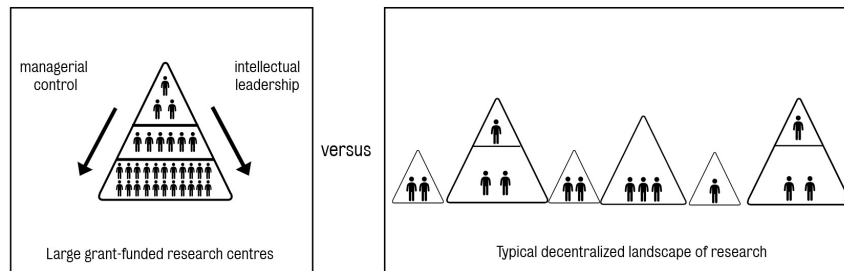
Against the centralization of development research funding

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Against the centralization of development research funding in large grant-funded research centres (LGRCs)



This policy brief¹ assesses the trend towards the concentration of UK Government development research spending in multi-million pound **large grant-funded research centres** (LGRCs) headed by high-profile principal investigators (PIs) and the unreliable outcomes for policy makers:

- PI's control over LGRCs' multi-million pound budgets places them in a position of **simultaneous intellectual and managerial leadership** over pools of junior researchers who are incentivised to apply the PIs concepts uncritically.
- The centralization of research funding in LGRCs in politics and developments studies is **at odds with traditional systems of horizontal peer review and quality assurance**. In these fields knowledge production is typically decentralized.
- **A high volume of centre-branded grey literature** may be a response to funder demands and reporting requirements as opposed to an organic expression of broad applicability and scholarly uptake
- Conceptual claims made in policy-facing and public-facing publications may be only tenuously related to rigorous academic research and **the applicability of concepts may be overstated**.
- The case study of how the concept of 'the political marketplace' was disseminated through a major LRGC shows how **this funding model undermined academic rigour** in how a new concepts were used, with spillover effects on the wider knowledge base in conflict research.

Policy-makers should consider working with funders and academia to co-create more decentralized model of research in this and similar fields, where funding is spread more evenly across a larger number of researchers and concept generation. This would better harness the horizontal processes of peer-review and quality assurance already established among researchers thus avoiding the pitfalls of centralized pyramid-shaped hierarchies.

DR PORTIA ROELOFS - **AGAINST THE CENTRALIZATION OF DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH FUNDING, 2025**

¹ This policy brief draws on research published open access: Roelofs, Portia. 2025. "Large Grant-Funded Research Centres and Concept Generation in Development Research." The Journal of Development Studies, 61 (7). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00220388.2024.2420022>.

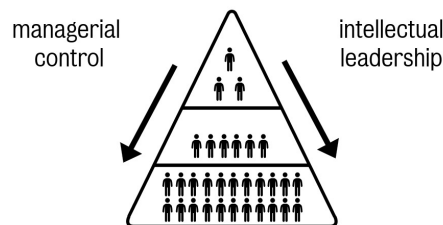
The centralization of research funding in conflict and development research

Context: DfID and the UK as a global research 'superpower'

The period between the 2015 and 2021 marked a high point in UK government spending on development research at British universities. The Department for International Development (DfID) (and later the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)) in particular wanted to understand the underlying political and social processes driving state fragility, conflict and insecurity in Africa and the Middle East.

The ring-fencing of ODA as 0.7% of GDP alongside cuts to staffing at DfID led DfID to allocate development research money in multi-million pound chunks to create large grant-funded research centres (LGRCs).

Features of LGRCs in development research



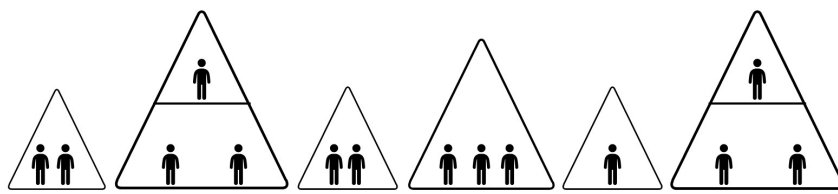
Large grant-funded research centres

- Originates in grant capture – created reactively in response to calls for applications rather than an organic evolution of existing research agendas
- Pyramid hierarchy with PI setting managerial and intellectual direction. In one case study in the paper a single PI oversaw an initial budget of £5m and a team of 50 more junior researches
- Ex-ante commitments to redefine the field incentivise “big bang” interventions; concepts are coined at application stage and then locked in through the “pathways to impact” requirement.
- Impact requires dissemination through grey literature, which is produced without double-blind horizontal peer review from outside the hierarchy that normally assures quality research

Knowledge production in development research

LGRCs constitute a much more centralised system of research than is usually found in these fields. A portion of ODA money for research went to STEM subjects like epidemiology and medicine, where research has high fixed costs and STEM research frequently places whole labs of researchers working on the same project into hierarchical line-management relationships under a single PI.

By contrast, qualitative work in on on conflict and development in social science fields like politics and development studies is a decentralized system of knowledge production. Funding in these fields is typically delivered in smaller amounts across a relatively horizontal landscape of many researchers working at different institutions. It is common for major contributions to the field to come from researchers working either individually or in small teams.

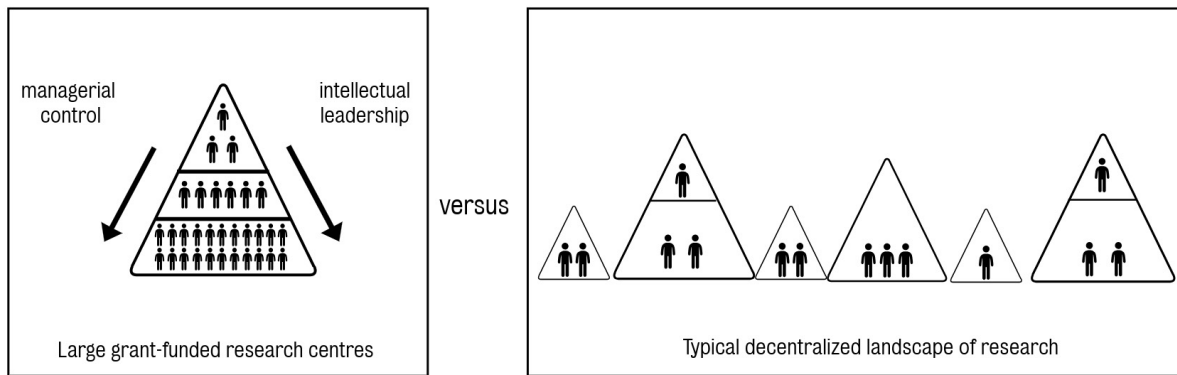


Typical decentralized landscape of research

In a decentralized system, knowledge production is typically incremental, with different researchers building on, refining and critiquing each other's work through ongoing dialogue in academic journals and conferences. It is open ended: researchers may have theories and hunches, but knowledge production is unpredictable and initial claims are subject to falsification, amendment and refinement in the field.

LGRCs and concept generation

This landscape of incremental, open-ended and unpredictable research sits uncomfortably with the demands of grant calls for LGRCs. Following ministerial ambitions for world-leading research and value for money in aid spending, these grant calls demanded that PIs on grant application make big claims about the significance of the research they would produce. In fields characterised by incremental and open-ended research, such as politics and development studies, LGRCs marked a shift to 'big bang' interventions with prospective PIs making ex-ante commitments at grant application stage to revolutionise their field of study through the generation of new concepts.



The nature of this field was thus at odds with the need to allocate money in large chunks. The limiting constraints on producing high quality evidence include time and an individual researcher's capacity to subject their first-hand experiences to critical, theoretically informed reflection. Researchers with a high degree of expertise, skill and experience may be able to achieve some scaling-up of their impact through the mentoring and supervision of peer and junior researchers, but these processes are also time and effort-intensive and not infinitely scalable.

Applicants for these multi-million pound grants were required to make far-reaching claims about the potency of the 'world-leading' research they would conduct and the applicability of the findings. Ex ante grant proposal forms had sections for multi-page discussion of 'pathways to impact', and ex post reporting portals, such as the UKRI Gateway to Research website requiring the awardees to itemise not only research findings but outcomes under eight categories including 'impact summary', 'policy influence' and 'engagement activities'. This had the unintended effect of 'locking-in' concepts at the application stage.

Scrutiny, review and dissemination of concepts

The standard model of scrutiny and quality control in the social sciences is double blind peer review at the point of submission for publication in a journal, an an inherently horizontal decentralized system. Peer review is premised on the idea that quality and rigour are best assured through a pool of roughly equally qualified researchers each critiquing each others' work.

In the production of grey literature at LGRCs, scrutiny and review takes place in the context of pyramid-shaped hierarchies. Not only does this suggest implicit and explicit power imbalances, with more junior researchers dependent on the continued discretionary support of the PI for access to funding, resources and employment, but moreover the success of the centre as a whole, and prospects for continued funding into the future, depends on the delivery of a body of conceptually coherent research outputs. Review and scrutiny therefore take place in a context where the various participants are invested in the centre achieving what it set out to achieve *ex ante*, and in particular affirming the applicability of key concepts set out in the original grant application.

Comparing centralized and decentralized models of research:

	Centralized	Decentralized
Nature of contributions to knowledge	'Big bang' interventions with commitment to re-define field <i>ex ante</i>	Incremental and open ended – significant contributions are often only identifiable in hindsight
Concept dissemination	PI's concepts used by subordinate researchers under managerial control of PI	Concepts adopted by fellow researchers following critique and debate among peers who have not vested interest in their uptake

Case Study: The concept of the 'Political Marketplace'

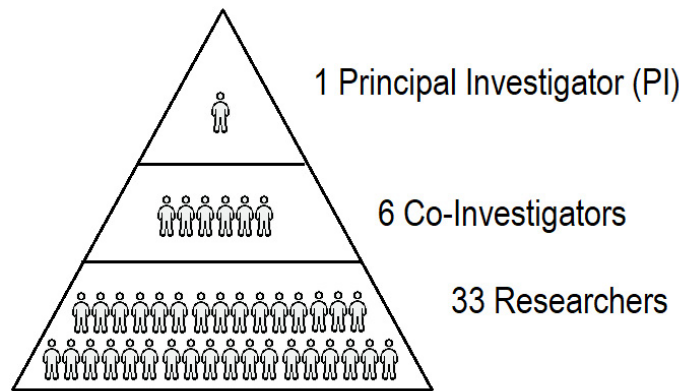
Two LGRCs (full details in the Appendix) popularised the concept of 'the political marketplace' in research aimed at policy-makers working on aid programming in Africa and the Middle East. The Political marketplace was coined by a senior academic who was PI/Research Director at these two centres. However, due to the uncritical use of the concept within these centre's policy-facing research outputs from the PI and his more junior colleagues, it is difficult to discern whether there is any analytic consistency across this now extensive 'grey' literature. The existence of an extensive quasi-academic literature popularising the 'political marketplace' has spillover effects on the wider literature and distorting the evidence base across the system as a whole.

CONCLUSION

The concentration of funding for development research through the creation of LGRCs research centres created pyramid-shaped hierarchical organisational structures with a small number of senior PIs in control of multi-million pound budgets. These PIs simultaneously exert managerial control and intellectual leadership over a large pool of more junior researchers who end up uncritically disseminating the PI's ideas through centre-branded grey literature. Policy makers should consider returning to a decentralised model of research where funding is more evenly spread across a more horizontal landscape of researchers working independently and in small teams.

APPENDIX 1

Case study of concept generation and dissemination in LGRCs: The 'political marketplace' and lack of rigour at CPAID and CRP



CPAID's organisational structure according to a 2018 centre brochure

This case study looks at two large grant funded research centres working on politics in Africa and the Middle East. These were the Centre for Public Authority and International Development (CPAID) and Conflict Research Programme (CRP), both based at the London School of Economics from 2016 onwards.

Name of centre	Year of inception	Funder	Initial grant funding
CPAID (Centre for Public Authority and International Development)	2017	Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) via Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)	£5million
CRP (Conflict Research Programme)	2016	Department for International Development (DfID)	£6.68million

A closer look at CPAID illustrates the scale at which these centres were operating. CPAID comprised of 50 researchers over 22 projects in 6 countries. This scale of funding and manpower at CPAID was matched by a large volume of academic outputs and impact activities, with over 227 publications and 48 instances of 'policy influence' listed on the UKRI portal. CRP was a consortium spread across four research units and with dozens of members.

The uncritical dissemination of the concept of the ‘political marketplace’

A senior researcher working as PI in CRP and Director of Research at CPAID coined the concept of ‘the political marketplace’. The concept was meant to make it possible to identify different countries whose political systems were operating as a ‘political marketplace’ – defined variously as an auction of loyalties or more generalised violent, money-driven politics. This responded to the demand from policy makers working on fragile and conflict affected contexts in Africa and the Middle East for evidence and theory to help them understand underlying dynamics, and tailor more politically sensitive modes of engagement.

The academic research on which this policy brief is based tracked the usage of this term through the policy-focused research outputs of the two centres. This case study presents a snapshot of this work, focussing on how the concept was used at CRP. It looks at a set of 6 research synthesis papers covering South Sudan, Iraq, Somalia, Horn of Africa and Congo, and a final paper looking at broader region wide data.

The term ‘political marketplace’ was used 205 times with in-bracket citations to seven different papers, all by the PI. However, across these 205 citations, there were no references to specific page numbers and only one instance of a direct quote to help define the term. Thus, the PI’s concept was used extensively by themselves and 20 more junior researchers on the grant they led, but in ways that undermined academic rigour. This highlights the risks of the overlap of managerial control and intellectual leadership in pyramid shaped hierarchies in LGRCs.

Country/region	Paper	Mentions of political marketplace	Source of citation	Direct quote or page reference?
Democratic Republic of the Congo	'Competing Networks and Political Order in the Democratic Republic of Congo: A Literature Review on the Logics of Public Authority and International Intervention.' <u>ii</u>	17	Policy brief by PI <u>iii</u>	No
Iraq	'Iraq Synthesis Paper Understanding the Drivers of Conflict in Iraq.' <u>iv</u>	29	None	No
N/A	'Data Synthesis Paper'. <u>v</u>	51	PI's book. <u>vi</u>	Direct quote on p13, no page reference

Country/region	Paper	Mentions of political marketplace	Source of citation	Direct quote or page reference?
South Sudan	'South Sudan Synthesis Paper'. <u>vii</u>	69	Think tank research report by PI <u>viii</u> Academic article by PI <u>ix</u> Academic article by PI <u>x</u> Academic Article by PI <u>xi</u>	No
Somalia	'Somalia Synthesis Paper'. <u>xii</u>	25	PI's book. <u>xiii</u>	No
Horn of Africa and Red Sea	'Data Synthesis Paper'. <u>v</u>	14	Academic article by PI. <u>xiv</u> PI's book. <u>xv</u>	No

Quality assurance as clear definitions and page references:

When researchers use concepts like 'the political marketplace' they are trying first to describe and identify diverse cases of the same phenomenon across different countries and contexts. Second, by grouping lots of different phenomena under the same conceptual category they are trying to explain the world by showing that each case of this broader concept operates in basically the same way. To do this well researchers need a clear and consistent definition of the concept so that when researchers encounter a possible new case, they can determine whether or not it conforms with the criteria, and whether cases which have apparent surface level similarities really are instances of the same underlying phenomena.

To be confident that each new case really is an instance of the wider phenomenon we would expect researchers using these concepts to follow basic citational conventions: i) quoting the definition of the concept and/or ii) citing the specific page where the concept is defined in the original text. Correct citational practices serve as a quality assurance mechanisms. A reader could then look up the specific page reference and check for themselves whether the case matches how the person who first came up with the concept intended it to be used.

Where these citational conventions are not followed, and researchers use the conceptual terms without referring back to a set definition, it is not possible to determine whether or not different researchers are using the concepts in the same way. They risk using the same word to mean different things. In scenarios where citational conventions are not followed, it is not possible to know whether the diverse examples are actually cases of the same underlying phenomena and thus whether they warrant similar policy responses. This erodes the quality of the evidence base and causes negative spillover effect as the wider conflict and development literature is flooded with research that uses concept but has not been subject to standard peer-review and quality assurance mechanisms.

Lastly, clear and consistent definitions are important where scholars are making claims to novelty. The large grant calls which led to LGRCs set out to elicit new and innovative research. Clear definitions enable other researchers working in the field to work out whether newly-coined concepts like the 'political marketplace' are actually distinct from pre-existing conceptual frameworks already in use in the literature, or whether they recycle existing analyses under new names.

Case study conclusion: Centralized research funding via LGRCs leads to poor value for money

In the case of CRP's synthesis reports, policy-makers using CRP research were repeatedly told that the contexts they worked in were a 'political marketplace'. This claim was made about a broad swathe of Sub-Saharan Africa and the MENA region (Congo, Iraq, South Sudan, Somalia and the Horn of Africa/Red Sea [broadly Ethiopia, Eritrea and Yemen]). xvi and loose citational practices, it is not possible to know whether the idea of the political marketplace was being used in the same way by different researchers and thus whether they were facing a single homogenous phenomenon across all these countries. Nor is it possible to ascertain whether this research was as innovative as it promised.

In conclusion, in the cases discussed above **the allocation of large chunks of research funding to pyramid-shaped hierarchical research centres led to the uncritical dissemination of concepts coined by their senior leadership.** This centralized model of research funding is at odds with the established horizontal systems for peer-review and quality assurance already existing in academia in this field. Funders should consider a decentralization of funding to better harness these pre-existing systems to achieve better value for money on research spending on development and conflict.

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i A full list of documents and references is available under Appendix Sources:

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xiv De Waal, A. (2009). Mission without end? Peacekeeping in the African political marketplace. International Affairs 85(1), 99–113. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2009.00783>.

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xvi The article on which this policy brief is based looks at the dissemination of a second concept - moral populism - coined by the PI of CPAID and finds similar patterns in usage and referencing across the 6 CRP synthesis papers.