

# UK foreign aid turns to research

£375 million from development budget will be redirected to science partnerships with middle-income economies.

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Laboratories in South Africa could benefit from a new UK programme for funding research in 15 countries.

The United Kingdom has launched a five-year, £375 million (US\$630 million) fund to support science and innovation partnerships with researchers in developing countries that will focus on economic development.

The [Newton Fund](#), first announced in December 2013, will consist of money transferred from the Department for International Development (DfID) to the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS), and will go towards meeting the UK's target of spending 0.7% of GDP on international development — while being also counted as part of the country's science budget.

"The fund's primary focus is to develop partner countries' long-term sustainable growth and welfare through building research and innovation capacity," says a spokeswoman for BIS.

## Boosting innovation

Xiaolan Fu, who studies technology and international development at the University of Oxford, UK, is pleased that the role of innovation in boosting developing economies is getting more attention from donor countries. "For international development, this is a very positive move to an area that has been ignored," she says. "For a long time the focus has been on poverty reduction through aid and political change, but international development needs to promote economic growth to get long-term, sustainable change."

There is a belief that science and innovation are not relevant for low-income countries, says Fu, but her research has found that innovation is active in even the poorest parts of the developing world — although it tends not to be conventional lab-based research and development. "It's a different kind of innovation, more learning-based and aimed at knowledge diffusion," she says.

The Newton Fund will support joint research projects; student and researcher fellowships; capacity-building projects such as training and infrastructure; and projects to translate basic research into innovation. Grants will focus on each partner country's priorities and development goals, such as energy security or climate-change adaptation.

"Science and innovation are central to economic development and growth in all countries. They underpin solutions to many of the

development issues facing the world today — from poverty reduction to improved health and sustainable growth,” said science minister David Willetts.

### **Worldwide partnerships**

The fund has 15 partner countries in the Middle East, South America, Asia and Africa. Most are not on the DfID’s list of 28 priority countries where the UK focuses its aid (the majority of which are in sub-Saharan Africa and low-income) but they are all on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s official list of development-assistance recipients, which means that they are eligible to receive development aid from the UK government.

“These countries have developed beyond the need for permanent aid programmes,” says the BIS spokeswoman. “Instead, the Newton Fund will use our joint strengths in scientific research to promote development across the world and build long-term collaborations with countries that will produce leading innovations in the future.”

All partner countries have said they are keen to match funds if possible, according to BIS. So far the UK has signed agreements for matching funds with Brazil, Chile and China. The Brazil deal, agreed on 9 April by UK Chancellor George Osborne during a visit to the country that focused on trade negotiations, is worth £18 million over three years, with Brazil and the United Kingdom each providing half of the money. Projects will focus on food security, urban development, industrial biotechnology and neglected diseases.

These kinds of collaboration are more suitable for the middle-income countries that feature on the Newton Fund list than for low-income ones, says Fu, because such countries have the financial and human resources to contribute as more equal partners. But they can still use help from the developed world. “These countries have enjoyed fast economic growth in recent years, but that growth is not balanced, and in many cases income inequality is widening,” she says.

The collaborative partnerships will help build capacity — both material and in personnel — in the partner countries in a way that avoids siphoning off the best brains to institutions in the developed world, adds Fu. “This group of countries will probably see more of a ‘brain circle’ in this partnership,” she says.

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