



ASCEND

Accelerating Sustainable Control and Elimination of Neglected Tropical Diseases



CROWN AGENTS
ACCELERATING SELF-SUFFICIENCY & PROSPERITY



KIT Royal Tropical Institute



Bangladesh • Ethiopia • Kenya • Malawi • Mozambique • Nepal • South Sudan • Sudan • Tanzania • Uganda • Zambia

RESEARCH & INNOVATION FUND

APPENDIX A: INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH & INNOVATION FUND

**Accelerating the Sustainable Control and Elimination of Neglected Tropical Diseases (Ascend)
Southern and Eastern Africa and South Asia**

December 2020

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY /

The ‘Accelerating the Sustainable Control and Elimination of Neglected Tropical Diseases (Ascend)’ programme is funded by the ‘Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)’ of the UK Government. It is a three-year integrated neglected tropical disease (NTD) programme aiming to deliver over 400 million treatments to accelerate control and elimination efforts for five NTDs; schistosomiasis, lymphatic filariasis, trachoma, onchocerciasis and visceral leishmaniasis.

The wider Ascend programme is divided into two parts, each led by a different consortium. The Ascend Southern and Eastern Africa and South Asia consortium consists of Crown Agents, KIT Royal Tropical Institute, Oriole Global Health, and Abt Associates, and focusses on 11 countries in these regions. The Ascend West and Central Africa programme is led by Sightsavers, and focuses on 13 countries in West and Central Africa.

A core component of the programme is the Ascend Research and Innovation Fund (RIF). This fund will identify or produce evidence of innovative approaches to NTD programming to accelerate progress towards control and elimination by addressing known barriers or issues. The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed the NTD landscape, and one of the areas the fund seeks to explore is how adaptive NTD delivery can be supported to ‘build back better’ to minimise the risks of COVID-19 whilst also accelerating the elimination of NTDs.

This document provides an introduction to the RIF managed by ASCEND Lot 1 Southern and Eastern Africa and South Asia, and should be read in conjunction with the Call for Applications published in December 2020 on the Crown Agents website.

All stakeholders in the global community affiliated with eligible organisations, including non-profit, academic and for-profit or government-owned organisations, are welcome to apply to the fund, but must be able to demonstrate research or innovations capacity. Prospective applicants may submit multiple applications. International applicants are encouraged to show evidence of national collaboration and capacity strengthening in the target countries in their approach. Priority will be given to applications that relate to at least one of the five Ascend targeted NTDs and one of the eleven countries that are part of the ASCEND Lot 1 Southern and Eastern Africa and South Asia programme.

- **NTDs:** lymphatic filariasis, onchocerciasis, schistosomiasis, visceral leishmaniasis, and trachoma
- **Countries:** Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Bangladesh, and Nepal

We accept multi-country proposals as long as one of the countries impacted by the proposed project is part of the eleven countries covered under this programme. The fund is looking to invest in a range of project types that vary in size and focus – from those that increase country capacity to adapt NTD platforms to respond to COVID-19; to others which strengthen or expand routine programme activities; to those that support field research and research uptake.

Applicants may apply for grants ranging from £25,000 to £350,000 to support projects. Applicants are requested to submit a Letter of Intent by the 15th of January 2021, the deadline for the submission of a Concept Note is the 29th of January 2021. Applicants will be informed of the outcomes by mid-March 2021. All final project activities and reports will have to be completed and submitted by 31 January 2022.

SECTION 1: OVERVIEW /

1. Introduction

Neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) affect more than 1.5 billion people every year, causing high morbidity such as blindness, disability, pain and stigma, and in some cases mortality. Populations most impacted are those that are most marginalized, living in the poorest parts of the world without access to basic services such as adequate sanitation. By preventing those affected from working and attending school, NTDs present a significant burden on economic opportunities and quality of life.

The ASCEND Lot 1 Southern and Eastern Africa and South Asia programme will make major progress towards eliminating five debilitating and poverty trapping NTDs in a number of the world's poorest countries. Specifically, the programme is contributing to the elimination of **lymphatic filariasis (LF)**, **trachoma** and **visceral leishmaniasis (VL)** as a public health problem, making significant progress towards eliminating transmission of **onchocerciasis** and controlling morbidity of **schistosomiasis**. The programme runs in 11 countries in close partnership with their ministries of health: **Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Bangladesh, and Nepal.**

1.1 Why is ASCEND important?

- **The programme will protect millions of people from NTDs.** A significant proportion of the world's poorest communities are at risk of these debilitating diseases. The programme will help several countries reach elimination thresholds and contribute to a major leap forward in global control and elimination efforts.
- **We believe every person – no matter who they are, where they live, or how much money they have – should be able to access health services.** To help achieve this vision and ensure no one is left behind, including people with disabilities as well as other marginalised groups. Ascend will focus on the inclusiveness of our NTD programmes and work with ministries of health to support enduring, sustainable improvement.
- **It will strengthen healthcare building blocks,** working side by side with ministries of health to support the training, systems and tools needed to fight NTDs. This will work to ensure sustainability of NTD programming and ensure the legacy of Ascend continues into the future.

1.2 Relation between the Research and Innovation Fund and the Ascend programme

As part of the wider Ascend programme, the Research and Innovation Fund (RIF) has been set up to respond to emerging needs from the wider NTD community. It will provide strategic investments, for example to support filling emerging critical gaps in intervention coverage and to deliver an enhanced learning agenda, for example via operational research related to programmatic activities (e.g. how to increase access to NTD services by a vulnerable group). The fund will be responsive to emerging issues and insights from Ascend and the wider operating environment.

The fund is looking to address common problems facing multiple countries, with solutions that create impact over a short time frame and have potential to be scaled up. Projects must demonstrate how findings can be put into practice in the wider NTD control programmes and impact how NTD programming is delivered in future. We strongly encourage you to closely review the relevant Ascend activities¹ and coordinate with Ministries of Health as well as Ascend Country Leads and partners before applications¹ are submitted. This will avoid duplication and ensure complementarity to ongoing activities.

1.3 Relation to Ascend West and Central Africa

As noted above, the broader Ascend programme consists of two consortia, of which ASCEND Lot 1 Southern and Eastern Africa and South Asia is one. The other is the Ascend West and Central Africa programme led by Sightsavers, together with the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM), Mott MacDonald and the SCI Foundation and focuses on 13 countries in West and Central Africa.

¹ See the Ascend portal: <https://www.crownagents.com/projects/accelerating-the-sustainable-control-and-elimination-of-neglected-tropical-diseases-ascend-information-portal/>

The Ascend West and Central Africa programme also manages a Learning and Innovations Fund. Both consortia run similar funding rounds, but the timing and detail differ. Further details on this fund can be found [here](#).

Interested parties are welcome to apply to both consortia's calls for proposals, or to propose an approach which cover countries in both (also see section on eligibility criteria).

1.4 COVID-19

The ASCEND Lot 1 Southern and Eastern Africa and South Asia programme has responded directly to the COVID-19 pandemic and worked closely with FCDO to re-prioritize funding and assist with countries' COVID-19 response plans, referred to as 'COVID-pivot' which focussed support on the [WHO COVID-19 response pillars](#). This included strengthening COVID-19 risk communication and community engagement; strengthening surveillance and COVID-19 data management, supporting local supply chains for procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE) and continuation of regular health programming inclusive of VL control programmes.

In addition, ASCEND Lot 1 Southern and Eastern Africa and South Asia has also been helping to secure the conditions that lead to the safe resumption of community based NTD activities. For this purpose we are working with governments partners on implementing programmes in a measured and strategic manner to ensure resumption of activities is appropriate assessed to mitigate risk of COVID-19 transmission between and within communities. Ascend has therefore developed and adopted a set of guidelines and tools which can support programme resumption through amended standard operating procedures (SOPs) and assessing risks of implementation and identifying appropriate mitigating actions through a risk assessment tool (known as the risk assessment and mitigating actions (RAMA) tool). Successful applicants will be expected to include a government approved COVID-19 risk assessment during the planning phase and submit an approval checklist (see "Call for Applications").

2. What will the fund support?

The fund must be used for activities that enhance the elimination and control of NTDs in eligible Ascend countries or their border regions. These activities should provide added value, such as improved learning or enhanced impact, and should be used for activities complementary to the main programme activities. Projects should be designed to bring about measurable results within NTD programmes. We encourage applications that will bring value to beneficiaries through innovative and inclusive ideas.

The fund is willing to support varying types of projects. Examples include, though are not limited to:

- Research-focused projects which validate ideas through testing, gathering evidence and conducting desk-based studies or field work (refer to section 1.5 Research and Ethics).
- Projects which are testing the feasibility of a new idea or assumptions to justify proof of concept.
- Projects which involve direct implementation in-country to test out new approaches or treatment strategies.
- Projects that have tested an idea and are seeking to conduct further primary or secondary data analysis to document further evidence.

2.1 Innovation

Innovation can mean different things to different people. The fund uses the following definition which is similar to Ascend West and Central Africa:

“Innovation in this context is not just limited to high-tech or brand-new solutions, but is about i) **developing and testing creative solutions** to known challenges ii) **learning and openness to adapt**, as innovation has an inherent risk of failure and iii) **supporting a vision** for scalability and increasing impact. Examples of innovative work may include bringing in learning from outside of the NTD sector or bridging the gap between research and implementation.”

The fund will consider different types of innovation as follows:

Core – Incremental improvements on what is being done currently.

Adjacent – Transferring methods or approaches from one context (e.g. Country, Sector, or Scale) to another.

New – Novel inventions or ways of doing things.

As noted above, innovation inherently carries a risk of failure – we support that risk as long as valuable lessons are clearly learned, and the implications of failure are accounted for.

A core consideration for all funded initiatives is long-term sustainability. All applicants will need to demonstrate how they are working with national level implementing partners to create and build partnerships that can drive relevant sustainable development results in NTD control and elimination.

Please do not be deterred if you are unsure whether your idea would fit with the types of projects and innovations we are looking for we encourage you to contact the fund team (clarifications@ascend.crownagents.com).

2.2 Inclusion and beneficiary engagement

Central to the Ascend programme is an inclusive approach that seeks to “leave no one behind” ([United Nations Development Programme Leave No One Behind framework](#)). A “one-size-fits-all’ approach to development programming will leave some groups of people at risk of exclusion because different needs and societal dynamics create context-specific challenges to accessing health care. These challenges, which often intersect, may include but are not limited to:

- Religious or caste/racial/ethnic discrimination
- Gender inequality
- Internally displaced person or refugee status
- Stigma or access barriers linked to disability
- High levels of illiteracy and poverty
- Prisoner status

Understanding that these factors exist and result in barriers to accessing services is fundamental to ensuring a “leave no one behind” approach. Meaningful participation of key stakeholders, such as disabled people’s organisations (DPOs), is essential in designing and delivering inclusive programmes. Applications to the fund will be assessed on their leave no one behind strategy and evidence supporting the project proposal arising from beneficiary and stakeholder engagement. Applicants should be able to identify barriers to inclusion of particular people/groups in their project location and how they plan to address those barriers. Evidence arising from the engagement of beneficiaries and key stakeholders will also be required, such as: what beneficiary/stakeholder input or feedback from previous programmes have informed the proposal; the beneficiary/stakeholder perspective that justifies the investment; and how beneficiary/stakeholder engagement will be used to identify/assess potential risks or validate assumptions.

3. Research and innovation priorities

The fund welcomes research and innovation proposals which relate to one or more of the four priority areas:

Priority area 1: Delivering NTDs in the context of COVID-19

- Innovative ideas, technologies, or measures (cost saving, alternative, or integrated models) for NTD programme delivery during COVID-19
- The cost or social cost of implementing NTD programmes during COVID-19 (compared to pre-COVID-19 implementation)
- Cross-country analysis to determine how NTD programmes (or resilience of health systems) have responded to COVID-19 and identification of opportunities for efficiencies and streamlining
- How to effectively deliver NTD programmes during COVID-19 (e.g., time sensitive and responsive supply chain that responds to urgent COVID-19/PPE needs)

Priority area 2: Health systems strengthening – and how to build sustainability for integrated programmes

- Promoting government ownership while transitioning away from donor support
- Models/best practices for integration (BFM, quality of care, data reporting, etc.) and how to adapt them contextually and sustainably
- Costs and benefits of integrating NTDs and comparing how this is done with or without donor support

Priority area 3: Data systems and building stronger use of data for NTD programming

- Improving data use among decision-makers and use of programme data for programme adaptation (and with what impact)
- NTD data linkage and integration to existing systems (national and global) while avoiding duplication across multiple platforms

Priority area 4: Leave no one behind (LNOB) and how to reach the poorest and most marginalised people

- Methods for ensuring NTD services achieve LNOB: evidence of LNOB sensitization among community health workers (CHW), effective incentives (including non-financial incentives) to CHW for mapping LNOB cases, active LNOB case detection, free/subsidized NTD services to LNOB by government, etc.
- Identification of effective indicators that can measure LNOB integration in an NTD Programme

4. Research and ethics

The focus of any funding for research is on operation / implementation research and activities to support both the dissemination and uptake of research findings ([link](#) to FCDO research uptake guidance).

Any research producing practically-usable knowledge (evidence, findings, information, etc) which can improve programme implementation (e.g. effectiveness, efficiency, quality, access, scale-up, sustainability) regardless of the type of research (design, methodology, approach) falls within the boundaries of operations / implementation research ([link](#) to WHO operational research framework).

The research activity must be conducted in a manner consistent with established ethical standards and should receive ethical clearance from local institutional review boards in advance of being implemented (see [link](#) to FCDO Ethics Guidance). Not all research will need formal ethical clearance, for instance if only secondary data are being used, or one may be able to apply for a formal waiver. If you are unclear whether a particular activity should receive ethical clearance, please consult the Ascend team in accordance with the clarifications procedure outlined in the Call for Applications document.

SECTION 2: ELIGIBILITY /

5. Funding per award and project timeline

The RIF is looking to support a range of project types with investments that vary from £25,000 to £350,000.

Please note that applicants will be informed of the outcome of the selection process by mid-March and all activities and reports have to be completed and submitted by the 31st of January 2022 at latest.

6. Applicant eligibility

We welcome applications from applicants affiliated with eligible organisations (both global and local). These may include but are not limited to Ascend partners, governmental institutions, non-profit organisations, academic institutions and for-profit businesses.

The Fund welcomes applicants from any country and there is no limitation or preference given on the basis of nationality. Applicants can be consortia of organisations, but a consortium must have a designated lead organisation that will be held responsible for the consortium's delivery.

Please note that all short-listed applicants will be reviewed for their capacity to conduct and produce high quality research. Applicants for a research project will need to demonstrate capacity to deliver a research project. Applicants for an innovation will need to demonstrate track record in documenting and leading innovations related to their proposal, or transferrable skills.

7. Project eligibility

Projects must relate to at least one of the five NTDs and at least one of the eleven countries that are part of ASCEND Lot 1 Southern and Eastern Africa and South Asia programme.

Funds cannot be used for activities already budgeted and planned for in the wider Ascend programme including COVID pivot activities. In addition, certain costs are not eligible, as outlined in the FCDO Eligible Cost Policy (see Call for Applications clause 10). Further details are in Call for Applications Annex C, the subcontract.

7.1 Multi-country projects

We accept multi-country proposals as long as one of the countries impacted by the proposed project is part of the eleven countries covered under this programme. Your proposal must provide relevant information for the proposed activities in each country, outlining the operational context and providing specific details of the problems to be addressed in this context. The project does not have to follow the same approach in each country, but all project activities must contribute to achieving the project outcome. Applicants must provide a clear rationale for working in multiple locations/countries and demonstrate how there will be cross-learning between the countries.

We also encourage multi-country proposals which include countries in West and Central Africa covered by the Sight Savers' Ascend consortium², but would recommend reaching out to the ASCEND Team to discuss in advance in accordance with the clarifications procedure outlined in the Call for Applications document.

8. Compliance and due diligence

Due diligence assessments of all organisations will be undertaken to assess whether the organisation and its local project implementation partners have the necessary policies, processes, governance systems and

² Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone

resources to deliver the project successfully. This includes human resources - ensuring the organisation has the right skills and experience to manage FCDO funds accountably and for the purpose they were awarded.

Please refer to the Call for Application document for the full details on documentation around compliance and due diligence, and which documents have to be completed (this includes a Business Partner Questionnaire, a Safeguarding Check list and the ASCEND Delivery Chain Map.

SECTION 3: TIMELINE AND PROCESS /

Please refer to the Call for Application document published in December 2020 for the full details, the following provides a brief overview:

- Letters of intent are due on the 15th of January 2021, Concept Notes are due on the 29th of January, and should be submitted by email to technicalbids@ascend.crownagents.com.
- The proposals will go through an initial review for eligibility, and then a detailed review based on the evaluation criteria (Call for Applications, section D)
- Successful applicants will be notified by mid-March on the outcomes of the selection process. This will be followed by a process of negotiating and awarding contracts.

Contracted applicants will have the opportunity to fully develop their detailed proposals and plans in a short planning phase. Approval of the planning phase will be required prior to continuing to the implementation phase. All activities and reports of the implementation phase have to be completed and submitted by the 31st of January 2022.

SECTION 4: SUPPORT /

We would like to, as much as possible, make this fund inclusive, minimise the burden of applying and provide value throughout the application process regardless of award outcome.

We will, therefore, be providing support to prospective applicants, who are encouraged to liaise with the fund team as soon as possible, in case of any issue related to the application process or the use of the templates.

We encourage all interested applicants with an idea to apply! If you have an idea, we would love to hear from you – if you would like guidance or support at any stage, please reach out to the fund team at clarifications@ascend.crownagents.com

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