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A new vehicle to accelerate the UN Sustainable Development Goals



The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are unquestionably visionary. But with only a decade left until 2030, the UN Secretary General has announced that we are at a crossroads in the achievement of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development,¹ and member states have released a political declaration to demand accelerated implementation.² Yet delivering 169 targets across 17 interconnected goals is a major challenge for any government. For low-resource and humanitarian settings, the challenge is even more acute. Additionally, clear mechanisms for delivering solutions that can address an integrated agenda do not exist.

This crisis in delivery could have severe consequences for the next generation. Africa’s adolescents (aged 11–18 years) are the fastest growing population group in the world, estimated to reach half a billion by 2050. This population group represents huge potential and future capacity but is among those most left behind by the SDGs—as such it is an excellent case for investment. Achieving a range of global goals for adolescents in Africa would have widespread effects, but a new vehicle is needed to implement these goals. Use of development accelerators might be this fundamental change in approach. Promoted by the UNDP, accelerators are conceptualised as pragmatic actions that have a simultaneous cumulative effect across a range of goals.³ Emerging evidence shows that accelerators can be a reality for adolescents—for example, in South Africa,

cash transfers to poor households reduced sexual risk behaviour in adolescents (SDG 5) as well as a range of other SDGs.⁴

Evidence suggests even greater potential for beneficial effects by use of accelerator synergies (combinations of two or three accelerators that deliver greater reach and resonance) compared with singular accelerators. When good parenting or school feeding were combined with cash transfers, beneficial effects were magnified for nutrition, cognitive development, education, and safety.⁵ A 2019 demonstration-of-concept paper tested whether multiple SDGs could be improved simultaneously in one of Africa’s most left-behind populations—adolescents living with HIV. The paper noted that three accelerators taken together (safe schools, good parenting, and cash transfers) had a combination effect across seven SDG targets within the goals of health (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), and violence prevention (SDG 16).^{6,7}

The next global priorities are to find accelerator synergies for the SDGs, appraise cost-effectiveness, provide pragmatic objectives with high value for money, and feed directly into country-level strategies for implementing the SDGs.⁸ The UK Research and Innovation Global Challenges Research Fund Accelerate Hub has been set up to achieve these priorities. The hub is a shared research initiative across UN agencies, the African Union, non-governmental organisations, and

For the UK Research and Innovation Global Challenges Research Fund Accelerate Hub see <https://www.acceleratehub.org/>

	Work package aim and methodology	Desired outcome	Work package tasks	Leads
Work package 1	Impact, co-creation, and capacity building	Improved policy and services for 20 million African adolescents and their children	Adolescent co-design, policy consultation, and engagement; trained service providers (34 countries); capacity-sharing for early-career African researchers	Evelyn Gitau (African Population and Health Research Center Kenya); Prof Kevin Marsh (African Academy of Sciences; Africa Oxford Initiative)
Work package 2	Observational cohorts across Africa	Identification of accelerators and combinations	Quasi-experimental analyses, new data generation, and cost-effectiveness analyses	Elona Toska (University of Cape Town); Heidi Stöckl (London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine)
Work package 3	Innovation laboratory	Identification of cross-context transportability, sequencing, and merging	Interdisciplinary workshops and collaborative projects; merging existing interventions	Chris Desmond (University of KwaZulu-Natal); Prof Elleke Boehmer (University of Oxford)
Work package 4	Randomised trials	Identification of accelerator combinations through experimental and moderator studies	Accelerator synergies across child developmental stages	Kate Orkin (University of Oxford; Busara Kenya); Prof Alan Stein (University of Oxford; University of Witwatersrand)
Work package 5	From evidence to scale	Cost-effectiveness and investment cases, scaling and adapting actions across Africa	Costing and cost-effectiveness analysis of identified interventions; facilitating adolescent engagement and examining adolescent acceptability	Marisa Casale (University of the Western Cape); Prof Olayinka Omigbodun (University of Ibadan)

Table: Structure of the UK Research and Innovation Global Challenges Research Fund Accelerate Hub for Africa’s adolescents

donors, with joint south–north academic leadership. The hub follows previous successful approaches, such as the joint learning initiatives, by incorporating a wide range of global agencies but being free-standing to ensure generation of independent evidence. This approach incorporates an early career development section so that countries will benefit not only from the findings but also from the human resources created in the process. Importantly, the hub is co-led by adolescents in advisory groups across west, east, south, and central Africa (table).⁶

This initiative is the first to identify development accelerators with data-driven insight. The nature of looking at outcomes across SDGs requires a new way of working: across academic disciplines and beyond single sectors of government operating independently. These new collaborations have the potential to identify innovative and unexpected combination interventions. The UK Research and Innovation Global Challenges Research Fund Accelerate Hub will also examine further questions to support national policy provision. Are accelerators grouped by type (such as individual-level and community-level provision), and do combinations need to be built across or within these groups? What actions or additions are needed to make an intervention into an accelerator, to understand deceleration, and to apply the evidence at scale? For example, at another stage of life, early childhood nutrition interventions might not work in isolation, but when combined with improved quality of childcare these interventions have long-term benefits on employment, achievement, and health.

Putting the accelerator framework into operation has implications far beyond Africa’s adolescents. In 2020, the 75th anniversary of the UN includes a commitment to identify solutions that close the gap between the aspirations of the SDGs and current trajectories. This commitment recognises that, for many countries, the SDGs are currently unreachable because the so-called decade of action demands that integrated approaches be scaled up; however, financial and structural barriers and diverting challenges, such as the COVID-19 outbreak, impede action. By enabling member states to achieve as many SDG targets as possible in a cost-effective way, accelerators could be a workable vehicle to get them there.

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