XCEPT | CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS

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Frequent Asked Questions
Call for Concept Notes – Climate Change

The XCEPT Research Fund is commissioning research on the relationship between climate change, informal trade networks, and instability in conflict-affected borderlands. The Call for Concept Notes opened on 21 August 2025. A Q&A was held on 5 September. The deadline for clarification questions was 9 September.

This Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) document was published alongside the Call. It has now been updated to provide responses to questions asked during the Q&A and via email. New questions asked appear at the end of each section, under a sub-header called 'Updated FAQs'.

The answers to these questions take precedence over what is written in the original Call for Concept Notes.

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1 About XCEPT

1.1 What is XCEPT?

The Cross-border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme brings together world-leading experts and local researchers to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour. Funded by UK International Development, XCEPT offers actionable research to inform policies and programmes that support peace.

XCEPT's focus on conflict-affected borderlands and how conflicts connect across borders sets us apart. We view conflicts as complex systems that connect across borders and ensnare conflict actors and communities, intertwining the licit and illicit, the formal and informal.

We argue that since conflicts are not bound by national borders, responses to conflict should not be bound by national borders either. Responses to conflict should be transnational. They should work at local, state, and regional levels and enable integrated and coordinated international responses.

Chemonics UK is the lead implementing partner for XCEPT, working with King's College London. Other core partners during the life of the programme have included: The Asia Foundation; Chatham House; Conciliation Resources; Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center; and Rift Valley Institute.

XCEPT works with many other research organisations through the XCEPT Research Fund (XRF). These include leading universities and think tanks and grassroots organisations dedicated to building peace. XCEPT offers awards to both individuals and institutions to support high-quality mixed-methods research, published in leading journals and institutional channels. We support researchers in innovative application of remote research methods alongside field data collection, pushing the boundaries of how technology can be used to track conflict dynamics.

1.2 What are examples of projects XCEPT has previously funded?

Examples of other projects funded through the XRF can be found in the 'ongoing and completed' awards section of the 'Research Fund' page on our website. To search across XCEPT's research outputs, use the website's search function.

2 Eligibility

2.1 Who can apply for an award?

This funding opportunity is only open to **organisations.**

Successful applicants will be responsible for receiving, managing, and reporting on the awarded funds, and must demonstrate the capability to do so in line with FCDO requirements for financial accountability and transparency. This includes maintaining appropriate financial systems and controls.

The awardee will also hold primary responsibility for duty of care, safeguarding, and risk management throughout the duration of the project, and must have appropriate approaches in place to manage these effectively.

Applicants should ensure that their proposed budget, and their approach to risk, safeguarding, and duty of care, are proportionate to the scale, scope, and complexity of the proposed research. These elements will be considered as part of the assessment process.

2.2 What qualifications are required for Principal Investigators?

Applicants should name a **Principal Investigator** (and Co-Investigators, as relevant). We expect Principal Investigators to be academics, subject matter experts, or advanced practitioners engaged in research, policy, or programme activities. Principal investigators will usually hold a PhD, but other equivalent academic or professional qualifications will also be considered.

2.3 Are there specific affiliation requirements for Principal Investigators?

No, Principal Investigators do not need to meet any specific affiliation requirements.

2.4 Can I apply as part of a consortium?

Yes, Applications from consortia, partnerships or networks of two or more organisations are welcome. For all consortia, a lead organisation should be declared.

2.5 The call states that Global South researchers and research organisations are strongly encouraged to apply. Which researchers / organisations are considered 'Global South'?

The XRF is committed to supporting equitable research partnerships and inclusive knowledge production. We encourage Global South collaboration and projects led by or meaningfully involving researchers based in the regions under study.

For the purposes of this call, 'Global South organisation' refers to an organisation that is legally organised under the laws of, and has as its principal place of business or operations in, a country that is a recipient of official development assistance (ODA) (see OECD list here), that is based in an ODA-recipient country, and is conducting research in or on an ODA-recipient country.

'Global South researcher' refers to an individual who is a national of an ODA-recipient country, is based in an ODA-recipient country (or has been displaced from one in the past several years), and is conducting research in or on an ODA-recipient country.

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2.6 Would a locally registered country office of an internationally headquartered organisation qualify as from the Global South?

No. A locally registered country office of an internationally headquartered organisation would not be considered a Global South organisation.

2.7 Is WHO Pakistan eligible to apply? / Is UNICRI eligible to apply as lead applicant?

Yes, UN agencies are eligible to apply as long as they meet the requirements for managing the grant.

2.8 Can an independent research institution under a governmental university apply?

Yes, provided it can demonstrate financial and operational independence to manage the grant.

2.9 Would a for-profit Research and MEL company be eligible?

Yes. Both for-profit and non-profit organisations are eligible to apply.

2.10 Can the same individual be part of multiple teams submitting proposals across different Calls?

Yes. The same individual can be part of multiple teams across different Calls, but no organisation can receive more than one award as the lead applicant per Call.

2.11 Can a team of three apply, even if not an organisation?

No, this call is only open to organisations.

2.12 Are partnerships with local researchers or organisations required, encouraged, or optional?

They are strongly encouraged, particularly to ensure contextual relevance and ethical research practices.

2.13 Would you consider funding a displaced PI from the Global South embedded in a European university, working with civil society organisations from the designated area?

Yes, provided the PI meets and the European university meet the eligibility criteria.

2.14 If there is a strong partnership with a local NGO and university, is there a preference for who should be the lead applicant?

There is no strict preference, but the lead should be the organisation best positioned to manage the grant and ensure delivery.

2.15 Can UK universities participate, and are they considered not-for-profit?

Yes, UK universities are eligible and are considered not-for-profit organisations.

2.16 Can sub-partners be individuals or must they be organisations?

Sub-partners can be either, as long as the arrangement is clearly justified and managed appropriately.

2.17 Can a Global South partner be a co-applicant or sub-recipient if the lead is a non-GS organisation?

Yes. In such cases we encourage the proposal to demonstrate meaningful participation by the Global South partner.

2.18 Can universities/research institutes serve as lead applicants? Are there geographic registration requirements?

Yes, universities and research institutes can serve as lead applicants. There are no geographic restrictions.

2.19 Can a PhD candidate act as PI on behalf of an eligible organisation?

Yes, if the organisation assumes responsibility for grant management and the candidate demonstrates sufficient experience.

2.20 Does the Principal Investigator need to hold a PhD?

Not necessarily. PIs are expected to be experienced researchers or practitioners. Equivalent professional experience is acceptable.

2.21 Is Global South leadership required or preferred? How should it be demonstrated?

It is encouraged. This can be shown through leadership roles, budget control, and decision-making authority.

2.22 Is a startup eligible if its researchers have relevant experience?

Yes, provided the team organisation has a track record of: managing projects of equivalent scale; and engaging in the research area proposed.

3 Application process

3.1 How do I apply for this funding opportunity?

The application process involves two stages: Concept Note and full Project Proposal. This call for Concept Notes is the first stage.

To apply, applicants should prepare and submit the following:

- **Concept Note Application Form** (max. 1200 words). This includes space to discuss the research idea and evidence gap; methodology; expected outputs; and proposed research team. It also includes space for you to describe a high-level **summary budget**. The form should be submitted as a Microsoft Word document in English.
- **CVs** must be provided for the Principal Investigator and any Co-Investigators (maximum three CVs in total).

The completed Concept Note Application Form and CV(s) should be submitted via email to XCEPT-Fund@chemonics.com by the submission deadline. Late or incomplete

applications will not be considered. **Applications must indicate in the subject line of the email the following: "C2-G052 Climate adaptation + [Name of lead organisation]".**

Detailed instructions on how to submit an application are included in the Call for Concept Notes document.

3.2 Is there a deadline for Concept Note submission?

Yes, the deadline is **Tuesday 16 September 2025 at 10:00 BST**.

3.3 In what language can proposals be submitted?

All applications and supporting documentation must be in English.

3.4 Can I submit more than one Concept Note?

Applicants may submit several Concept Notes, but no organisation will be awarded more than one award as the lead applicant.

3.5 Can I submit to more than one XCEPT funding call?

Yes, the same applicant can submit proposals to different XCEPT funding calls.

3.6 Can a rejected Concept Note be resubmitted?

No, proposals cannot be resubmitted after the applicant has been notified that they were unsuccessful in their application.

3.7 When will I be notified about whether I've been selected to move to the full Project Proposal stage?

Applicants will be notified by XCEPT regarding selection within three weeks of the Concept Note submission deadline.

3.8 How many applicants will be asked to submit a full Project Proposal?

A shortlist of **3-5 applicants** will be invited to prepare and submit full Project Proposals for evaluation by the Selection Committee.

3.9 For those invited to submit a full Project Proposal, what will be required?

Those shortlisted applicants who are asked to submit a full Project Proposal at the second stage will be asked to complete a full technical application, providing past performance examples, completing due diligence forms, and submitting a detailed budget and workplan. Further details on requirements and evaluation will be shared with those who are shortlisted.

Shortlisted applicants will have 3 weeks to complete their Project Proposal.

3.10 Who decides who will be shortlisted to submit full Project Proposals?

Concept Notes will go through an eligibility screening followed by a review and assessment, according to the Evaluation Criteria detailed in Section 7 of the call document ('How will your Concept Note be assessed?').

This step is led by members of the Selection Committee and the XCEPT team.

3.11 How many projects will be funded?

We expect to fund **one project**, with a maximum budget of £120,000.

Updated FAQs

3.12 Can UN agencies be exempted from signing the Declaration in the application form?

We understand the constraints for UN entities. Alternative arrangements may be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Yes, as a UN entity, UNICRI is eligible to apply.

4 Technical requirements

4.1 What are we looking for from this research?

Building on the understanding that climate stress in conflict-affected borderlands – and the resulting increase in informal cross-border trade – can both amplify the agency of local communities as well as fuel instability, this Call for Concept Notes seeks to fund research that examines whether – and under what conditions – such trade networks support climate change adaptation and/or influence conflict. Concept notes should consider the following interlinked research questions:

1. How do communities in conflict-affected borderlands draw on informal, cross-border trade networks to adapt to climate extremes? How are existing trade networks utilised or new ones formed?
2. How effective are such networks as a form of climate change adaptation and resilience-building?
3. Under what conditions do such informal, cross-border trade networks fuel instability and conflict, and what are the implications for local communities and climate adaptation?

XCEPT will value research that highlights civilian agency in how informal cross-border trade networks evolve in response to climate stress, including how local cooperation in borderlands unfolds to address climate impacts, and how these dynamics intersect with conflict. This could include, for example, consideration of the role of NSAGs alongside local communities in climate change adaptation, and the implications for conflict management. XCEPT also will value research that assesses the gendered dimensions of informal trade in response to climate stress, including implications for access to resources, participation in decision-making, and the distribution of risks and benefits.

For more details see Section 3 ('Description of the research to be commissioned') in the Call for Concept Notes document.

4.2 What are the preferred outputs?

The primary research output will be a high-quality paper or series of papers, subject to external peer review and suitable for publication by the Awardee organisation or prepared for submission to a peer-reviewed academic journal.

The project should include policy-focused outputs, such as summary briefing notes and presentations to policy audiences. The project also should include outputs geared for a wider public audience, such as commentaries, blogs, podcasts or videos. Applicants should list the outputs they plan to produce in the Application Form.

4.3 How will XCEPT support with outreach and dissemination?

XCEPT will offer technical review and feedback throughout the process. In coordination with XCEPT, awardees are expected to leverage their professional networks to generate opportunities for uptake and impact. XCEPT also will support contributors to showcase their research at events, webinars and in private briefings to policy stakeholders, as relevant. Finally, XCEPT will work with author(s) to enable open access publication, in line with FCDO requirements.[1]

4.4 Do we need to have Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval in place ahead of submission?

No, you do not need it in place ahead of submission. However, applicants must indicate in the submission whether ethical review (e.g., for human subjects research) is required from an Institutional Review Board (or equivalent ethics review body). The applicant will be responsible for obtaining any required approvals and provide relevant proof to XCEPT before any funds can be dispersed.

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[1] See FCDO's (formerly DFID's) Open and Enhanced Access Policy.

4.5 How narrowly should we define ‘informal trade networks’? Does it include services, labour, and information?

Informal trade networks may include goods, services, labour, and information flows. Applicants should define the scope relevant to their research context.

4.6 How strictly do you distinguish between informal vs. formal and licit vs. illicit trade?

The distinction is often blurred. Applicants should explain how they interpret and apply these terms in their research.

4.7 What is the expected link between illicit trade and climate change mitigation?

Proposals may explore how illicit trade affects or undermines climate mitigation efforts, including environmental degradation or regulatory evasion.

4.8 Is it acceptable to rely on proxy actors/intermediaries when access to borders is difficult?

Yes, provided the approach is well justified and maintains research rigor and ethical standards.

4.9 What are the expectations around M&E activities?

Applicants should include appropriate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track progress and assess impact.

4.10 Are you using a specific definition of informal trade?

No fixed definition is provided. Applicants should define the term based on their research context.

4.11 Can proposals examine other adaptation strategies beyond informal trade?

Yes, proposals may explore a range of adaptation strategies relevant to climate stress and instability.

4.12 Should research challenge dominant perspectives on climate and conflict?

Yes, research that reframes or challenges prevailing assumptions is encouraged.

4.13 Do oil production or critical minerals fall under the remit of the Call?

Yes, if they relate to climate change, informal trade, or instability in borderlands.

4.14 Can proposals cover broader effects of illicit trade on climate change?

Yes, including impacts beyond adaptation, such as environmental harm or governance challenges.

4.15 Is there a preferred language to describe climate change and instability?

No specific language is mandated, but clarity and relevance to the research context are important.

4.16 Should research examine the full causal chain or can it focus on one link?

Proposals may focus on a specific link or the full chain, depending on the research design.

4.17 How do you define ‘robust’ mixed methods – would trader surveys, market observation, and interviews suffice?

Yes, a balance of qualitative and quantitative methods such as surveys, observation, and interviews is acceptable.

4.18 Should proposals directly engage with non-state armed group dynamics or focus on community-level impacts?

Either approach is acceptable. Applicants should justify their focus based on relevance and feasibility.

4.19 Are there particular climate extremes that should be emphasized?

Applicants may focus on extremes most relevant to their context, such as droughts, floods, or heatwaves.

4.20 What are the expectations around dissemination – should activities be included in the budget and design?

Yes, proposals should include dissemination activities in both the budget and activity design. Applicants should demonstrate how they will engage different audiences and ensure policy relevance.

4.21 Who is the targeted public audience for public outputs?

The public audience may include communities in the research geographies, policy stakeholders, and broader civil society. Applicants should define their target audiences based on the research context.

4.22 Is academic output required?

Academic outputs are strongly encouraged, especially where the research contributes to conceptual innovation or fills gaps in the literature.

4.23 What if our institution does not require IRB but does internal ethics review?

Applicants must ensure that ethical review is appropriate to the nature of the research. Internal ethics review may be acceptable if it meets recognised standards, but applicants should explain their process and may need to provide documentation if shortlisted.

4.24 Can we get ethical review certification from XCEPT?

No. Ethical clearance must be obtained from the applicant's own institution or a recognised ethics review body. XCEPT does not issue ethics certificates.

5 Geographies

5.1 Is there a preferred geographic focus for proposals?

The proposed research should concentrate on XCEPT's core geographic regions, which include fragile and conflict-affected areas of:

- The Middle East, especially Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen
- The Horn of Africa, especially Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia
- Coastal West Africa and the Sahel
- Afghanistan and Pakistan
- Myanmar

Proposals that address other geographies will be considered. Research may focus on a single region or span multiple regions, with particular interest in research that offers comparative value for XCEPT's core areas of focus.

Updated FAQs

5.2 Will proposals including out-of-scope countries be downmarked?

No. Proposals that include borderlands where only one country falls within XCEPT's core geographies will not be downmarked, provided they demonstrate strong analytical relevance or comparative insights that enhance understanding of conflict dynamics in XCEPT's primary focus areas.

5.3 Can a study focus on one borderland with insights relevant to others?

Yes. A study may focus on a single borderland area if it generates insights that are applicable to other contexts or contribute to broader comparative learning.

5.4 Can hard-to-access areas be included? How many cases are expected?

Yes. Proposals may include areas that are difficult to access due to conflict, provided the methodology is feasible and ethical. There is no fixed number of cases required; applicants should justify their case selection based on research goals.

5.5 Is cross-regional or cross-national comparison preferred?

Both are acceptable. Applicants should choose the approach that best supports their research objectives and contributes to understanding conflict dynamics across borderlands.

5.6 Are stateless but peaceful areas eligible?

Yes, if the research demonstrates relevance to the themes of conflict-affected borderlands and cross-border dynamics.

5.7 Can we compare different scenarios within the same geography?

Yes. Comparative analysis within a single geography is acceptable if it helps generate policy-relevant insights.

5.8 Can case selection be within one country if comparisons are clear?

Yes. Structured comparisons within a single country are acceptable if they help address the research questions effectively.

5.9 Is Afghanistan–Central Asia of interest, or only Afghan–Pakistan?

While Afghanistan–Pakistan is a core geography, other bordering regions such as Afghanistan–Central Asia may be considered if they offer comparative value and relevance to XCEPT's themes.

5.10 Is the £120K grant allocated per geography or for one project?

The funding is not allocated per geography. It is intended to support projects of appropriate scale and scope, which may span multiple regions or focus on a single area with comparative insights.

5.11 Can internal borders within one country (e.g. Yemen) be the focus?

Yes. Internal borders within conflict-affected countries may be considered if they exhibit dynamics similar to cross-border conflict systems.

5.12 Can research focus on refugee or IDP camps instead of conflict zones?

Yes, if the camps are situated within or adjacent to conflict-affected borderlands and the research addresses relevant dynamics.

5.13 Should the two communities studied be on both sides of the border?

Not necessarily. The study should involve at least two communities, but they may be within one country if the research design supports comparative or cross-border insights.

5.14 Can non-adjacent borders be considered?

Yes, if the research clearly demonstrates how non-adjacent border dynamics contribute to understanding conflict dynamics and transnational linkages.

6 Budget

6.1 How much funding is available?

We expect to fund **one project**, with a maximum budget of £120,000.

6.2 What level of detail is required in the budget submission?

Applicants are expected to submit a budget that provides a high-level breakdown of estimated costs across major categories (e.g. personnel, activities, equipment, etc.) sufficient to demonstradte feasibility and value for money. This should include costs related to fieldwork, editing and publication, dissemination, etc. It should also include justification for the costs.

There is space for submitting this summary budget in the Concept Note Application Form. A detailed budget is not required at this stage.

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6.3 Can part of the personnel budget be allocated for teaching buyout?

Yes, if this is necessary to enable the research team to deliver the project.

6.4 Should costs for attending conferences and outreach events be included under 'Other Direct Costs'?

Yes, these should be included if they are part of the dissemination strategy.

6.5 Can the research budget cover studentships, especially for doctoral research?

Yes, provided the studentship is directly relevant to the delivery of the proposed research and is proportionate to the overall budget. We note that given the relatively short length of the project, it may not be practicable to cover a studentship.

6.6 Can the £120,000 budget include international travel and fieldwork?

Yes. Travel and fieldwork costs are eligible, as long as they are well justified and proportionate to the scope of the research.

6.7 Are there restrictions if the organisation already receives UK government funding?

No specific restrictions apply, but applicants must ensure there is no duplication of funding and that they can manage the grant in line with FCDO requirements.

6.8 Are there restrictions on overhead/indirect costs?

There is no fixed cap, but overheads must be proportionate and represent value for money. Applicants should clearly describe what overheads include.

6.9 What does 'remote research methods should not be included in the budget' mean? Will there be a separate budget?

XCEPT supports researchers to integrate remote research methods (such as satellite data) with field data collection and other data sources. Applicants may consider applying such methods and should outline a proposed approach, but do not need to include this in a budget, as it is funded separately. That said, if you plan to integrate remote research methods into your project, then it is best to have someone on your team who is familiar with these methods.

6.10 What are the arrangements for funding satellite data?

Satellite data costs may be covered separately. Applicants should describe their data needs, and XCEPT will advise on funding arrangements if shortlisted.

7 Contract

7.1 With whom are contracts signed?

Successful applicants will be contracted directly by Chemonics UK, who manage the XRF.

For applications submitted by a consortium, a lead organisation must be designated. This lead organisation will serve as the formal contract holder with Chemonics UK.

7.2 What is the average contract length?

XCEPT anticipates this award to run for a maximum of 12 months.

7.3 When are the projects likely to start?

XCEPT anticipates this awards to start in December 2025.

7.4 What are the reporting requirements?

Successful applicants will be expected to report their progress on a regular basis, for example through quarterly reporting.

7.5 Who owns the Intellectual Property Rights?

Any project-specific Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) created under these awards shall be owned by the awardee. In order to ensure the proper dissemination and uptake of the research, the awardee shall, as part of their contract with Chemonics, grant to Chemonics and FCDO a perpetual, irrevocable, non-exclusive, assignable, royalty-free licence to use these project-specific IPRs.

Updated FAQs

7.6 Is there flexibility in the project start date?

Yes. While projects are expected to start in December 2025, flexibility may be considered. However, all projects must end by the end of December 2026.

8 Contact information and Q&A

8.1 How can I find out more about this funding opportunity?

To learn more about this funding opportunity, please join the virtual question and answer (Q&A) session on **5 September 2025 at 10:30-11:30 BST**. This will be an opportunity to

ask questions about this call for papers. If you are interested in joining the Q&A, please confirm your attendance by completing this form: https://events.teams.microsoft.com/event/0c8e6764-81f3-4d36-b48c-bb6dd29030e3@7c1f24a6-7d39-452c-8237-0726e3b19a73

8.2 How can I contact the XCEPT team to ask questions?

You can contact the XCEPT Research Fund team via email at xcept-fund@chemonics.com

If you have any clarification questions, please ask them at the Q&A or email them to the email above by the clarification questions deadline on **Tuesday 9 September 2025, 18:00 BST.**