

Frequent Asked Questions Call for Concept Notes – Policy Responses

The XCEPT Research Fund is commissioning research that examines policy and programme interventions in conflict-affected borderlands. The Call for Concept Notes opened on 20 August 2025. A Q&A was held on 3 September. The deadline for clarification questions was 8 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.

1 About XCEPT

1.1 What is XCEPT?

1.2 What are examples of projects XCEPT has previously funded?

2 Eligibility

2.1 Who can apply for an award?

2.2 What qualifications are required for Principal Investigators?

2.3 Are there specific affiliation requirements for Principal Investigators?

2.4 If I am applying as an individual researcher, can I apply as a team?

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

2.6 Do organisations need to be local, or can INGOs also apply in the countries where they work? Does a locally registered country office of an internationally headquartered organisation qualify?

2.7 Are United Nations agencies (as an intergovernmental organisation) eligible?

2.8 Can people affiliated with UNHCR or UNRWA apply alongside an academic?

2.9 Are US-based organisations eligible?

2.10 Does a research proposal from an organisation in Colombia have any chance?

2.11 Is it acceptable to submit proposals in consortia (e.g., a non-profit with a for-profit research institute/university)?

2.12 Can a newly established university research institution apply, without a track record, but founded by experienced experts?

2.13 Given that 30% of the scoring criteria is based on "academic credentials," are individual PhD students unlikely to be accepted, even if requesting a small budget (e.g., £15,000)?

2.14 I am in my last year of PhD programme (I haven't yet passed my viva) and wanted to check with you whether I am eligible to be a PI on a small grant (GBP 15,000)?

2.15 How can individual applicants demonstrate capacity to manage funds and responsibilities at this scale?

3 Application process

3.1 How do I apply for this funding opportunity?

3.2 How do I apply as an individual? How do I apply as an organisation?

3.3 Is there a deadline for Concept Note submission?

3.4 In what language can proposals be submitted?

3.5 Can I submit more than one Concept Note?

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

3.7 Can a rejected Concept Note be resubmitted?

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

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

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

3.11 How many projects will be funded?

3.12 Instead of submitting full CVs for additional team members, could we annex short bios for six team members alongside the PI's CV?

3.13 What does "solicitation reference" mean in the declaration section?

3.14 Are templates for both the budget and narrative available?

3.15 Does the P.I. need to be from the lead organization, or can the P.I. be affiliated with one of the co-leading organizations?

3.16 In order to ensure equity between northern and southern leadership of the research, and balance across the various thematic and geographic areas of expertise, would it be possible to structure our proposal as having two 'Joint-PIs', provided we are clear about their respective areas of responsibility and leadership?

3.17 Is it necessary to name the sub-contractors (i.e., specific NGO/consultancy/individual person) in the concept note application, or can this information be provided only in the final application (if we are shortlisted)?

3.18 Regarding the full Project Proposal, what type of track record or samples of past performance are required? Should these relate specifically to the PI, the entire research team (PI + co-investigators), or the organisation(s) with which research team members are affiliated (e.g., their university)?

3.19 Can the contact person requested to verify past performance be a research officer at the PI's university (assuming the PI and the research officer have previously collaborated to deliver a grant)?

3.20 Is it acceptable for organisations to apply for multiple grant calls (e.g., this and the climate/conflict call)? Can we apply for other XCEPT calls as well, or is it limited to one per institution/person?

3.21 The rule that no organisation will be awarded more than one award as lead applicant — does this apply to each separate call?

3.22 For the call for concept notes Policy responses to address conflict economies in borderlands calls I noticed that in the FAQs it states 'applicants may submit several Concept Notes, but no organisation will be awarded more than one award as the lead applicant'. If you submit as a

lead and in a different consortium as a co-applicant, could you theoretically be eligible to be awarded two grants?

3.23 Is it possible to apply in more than one way — privately and as a consortium?

4 Technical requirements

4.1 What are we looking for from this research?

4.2 What are the preferred outputs?

4.3 How will XCEPT support with outreach and dissemination?

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

4.5 The call emphasizes both academic rigor and policy relevance, which can sometimes be challenging to balance. How should proposals navigate this tension? Should journal-level research quality be prioritised even if it limits immediate policy applicability, or is there flexibility depending on project goals?

4.6 Do the policies or interventions under investigation have to be formal (sanctioned by a government/authority), or can research explore community-based/non-state responses to illicit economies/conflict in borderlands?

4.7 Could you define borderland/cross-border area more clearly? Does this mean very specific locations at the borders, or can it be understood more broadly as areas with connections and conflict dynamics flowing across borders?

4.8 Can the comparative analysis be based on case studies within a single conflict-affected borderland area (e.g., DRC–Uganda or Kenya–Somalia), exploring differences and similarities between local scenarios, or does it need to feature entirely different geographies?

4.9 Given that borderlands often involve “interconnected political economies,” is XCEPT interested in research that examines how non-state governance systems (e.g., armed groups, tribal councils, informal trade networks) interact with or compete against state institutions?

4.10 When you talk about recommending policy responses, to which actors are you referring: borderland states, regional/international organisations, or the UK Government?

4.11 Does XCEPT have a stronger appetite for findings aimed at international donors, or for those that speak directly to regional/national governments that exercise direct operational control over checkpoints and trade regimes?

4.12 To shape findings effectively, what does “actionable insights” mean for XCEPT? Are they looking for recommendations that drive short-term local/national policy changes, or are longer-term/transnational recommendations equally valued?

4.13 The focus of the funding call is on policy tools. How much scope is there for supporting research aimed at strengthening evidence-based policy responses (i.e., testing how to build a stronger evidence base and use this to inform policy in complex conflict-affected contexts)?

4.14 The description states the call is designed to respond to and build on past borderland research highlighted in XCEPT-supported work. Does a proposal need to link to a specific previous piece of research, or just relate to a broadly similar topic/area?

4.15 The call notes that many policy frameworks “fail to take a truly transnational conflict ecosystems approach.” What criteria will XCEPT apply to assess whether proposed research adequately addresses this transnational dimension?

- 4.16 *Prior studies highlight that some interventions or components of broader initiatives may be counterproductive. Would XCEPT encourage concept notes that explicitly present the possible unintended consequences of major policy tools, rather than only their potential successes?*
- 4.17 *In high-risk geographies, would XCEPT consider designs that rely on diaspora interviews or network analysis in lieu of in-country fieldwork, if rigor and policy relevance can be demonstrated? More broadly, how do you define “field data collection” in the context of this call?*
- 4.18 *I wanted to seek clarification regarding the guidance on the larger study (£120k) on mixed methods and comparative case studies. Specifically, would a combination such as Iraq and Syria suffice to meet this requirement? Or would you envisage the inclusion of additional countries for the study to be considered sufficiently comparative, or more aligned with what you expect the comparative element of the larger research scope to cover?*
- 4.19 *I would like to apply to this with a Co-Investigator at a university in another country. They would employ an experienced team of local researchers from their region to conduct field research. Would that have an impact on where the ethical research clearance needs to take place, i.e. would that be at my university in the UK or at the university in the other country?*
- 4.20 *Is it accurate that the outcome could be a policy paper geared towards a think tank and not necessarily an academic peer-reviewed study?*
- 4.21 *How does the committee define “meaningful participation” for Global South researchers?*

5 Geographies

- 5.1 *Is there a preferred geographic focus for proposals?*
- 5.2 *Would a proposal examining the Cambodia–Thailand borderlands be eligible under the conflict-affected borderlands focus? / Is Bangladesh eligible for this call? / Is Rwanda eligible for this call? / We are an NGO in Colombia with border issues with Venezuela. Is it possible to apply?*
- 5.3 *Would a project on South Sudan, Sudan, and CAR — not entirely within XCEPT core regions — be considered? / Ghana is not considered a conflict economy but shares borders with conflict economies (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger). Is Ghana eligible in this context?*
- 5.4 *Since Afghanistan and Pakistan are listed together, does a proposal need to cover both, or is a Pakistan-only study acceptable?*
- 5.5 *Can borderland economies include frontlines inside a country experiencing instability or power struggles, such as Lebanon?*
- 5.6 *Can you clarify how narrowly or expansively you view Myanmar’s borderlands as extending into its neighbours?*
- 5.7 *If working in the MENA region, should research cover four countries, or can it focus on only two areas?*
- 5.8 *Are Senegal, Nigeria, and Cameroon included within “Coastal West Africa and the Sahel”?*
- 5.9 *Will projects that include borderlands where one country is not listed in the XCEPT focal areas (but others are) be downmarked in scoring?*
- 5.10 *Would a proposal focusing on a geography outside the core geographies, but with comparative case studies involving core regions, be scored as highly as one focusing on a core geography with outside comparisons?*

6 Budget

- 6.1 *How much funding is available?*

- 6.2 *What level of detail is required in the budget submission?*
- 6.3 *Are short-term dissemination/field visits allowed with the small grant (£15,000)? The description for this type of grant focuses on desk research and secondary data sources for analysis and/or online interviews (if applicable), but does this mean that in-country visits are not eligible for the budget?*
- 6.4 *At the concept note stage, can a proposal be designed to scale up or down across the four funding levels (e.g., from 1 to 3 comparative contexts)?*
- 6.5 *With regard to staff costs, does the funding cover them?*
- 6.6 *Could you clarify what categories of costs the budget can cover? Can it include staff time for researchers, or only research activities (fieldwork, travel, data collection, dissemination)?*
- 6.7 *Is there scope to include supporting researchers and project officers/managers in the budget, beyond the PI and up to two co-investigators?*
- 6.8 *What kind of equipment is allowed to buy?*
- 6.9 *Which costs are eligible? Are institutional overheads, indirect costs, and salary costs eligible?*
- 6.10 *What is the cap on overhead costs for this call?*
- 6.11 *How should indirect costs or overheads in the budget be presented — as separate items or embedded within categories with justification?*
- 6.12 *Are universities expected to use Full Economic Costing?*

7 Contract

- 7.1 *With whom are contracts signed?*
- 7.2 *What is the average contract length?*
- 7.3 *When are the projects likely to start?*
- 7.4 *What are the reporting requirements?*
- 7.5 *Who owns the Intellectual Property Rights?*
- 7.6 *Do research assistants have to be contracted through the institution where the PI is based, or can they be contracted through the CI's institution?*

8 Contact information and Q&A

- 8.1 *How can I find out more about this funding opportunity?*
- 8.2 *How can I contact the XCEPT team to ask questions?*

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?

XCEPT welcomes applications from both **individuals** and **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.

In line with these expectations, we do not anticipate awarding high value budgets to individuals acting outside of an institutional or organisational framework, unless they can clearly demonstrate the capacity to manage funds and responsibilities at that scale.

Global South researchers and research organisations are strongly encouraged to apply, independently or in partnership / collaboration with researchers or research organisations based in the Global North. Applications that include meaningful participation of Global South researchers and/or organisations will be scored more favourably.¹

Proposals should consider whether the research would be strengthened through the participation of researchers with **different disciplinary backgrounds**, or through partnerships between academics and policy professionals.

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 – for example, we encourage applications from former policymakers with deep experience working on relevant issues.

2.3 Are there specific affiliation requirements for Principal Investigators?

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

2.4 If I am applying as an individual researcher, can I apply as a team?

Yes, if you are submitting a proposal as an individual, you can apply as part of a team. However, only one lead researcher / Principal Investigator should submit the proposal. That individual will be named in the contract and will be responsible for project implementation, should the application be successful.

XCEPT prefers that co-investigators be engaged as subcontractors under the lead's contract. If this arrangement raise significant complications, then we can consider alternative mechanisms.

¹ 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.

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.

Updated FAQs

2.6 Do organisations need to be local, or can INGOs also apply in the countries where they work? Does a locally registered country office of an internationally headquartered organisation qualify?

INGOs can apply. A locally registered country office of an internationally headquartered organisation also can apply. Note that such an office would not be considered a Global South organisation.

2.7 Are United Nations agencies (as an intergovernmental organisation) eligible?

Multilaterals constituted under international law are fully eligible to apply.

2.8 Can people affiliated with UNHCR or UNRWA apply alongside an academic?

Yes, individuals affiliated with UN organisations may apply alongside an academic partner. This is acceptable as long as the contracting arrangements are clearly outlined in the application and the team is able to carry out the proposed research objectively and independently.

2.9 Are US-based organisations eligible?

Yes, US-based organisations are eligible.

2.10 Does a research proposal from an organisation in Colombia have any chance?

XCEPT welcomes submissions that explore geographies offering clear comparative value to its core areas of research. While Colombia is not currently among XCEPT's core geographies, a proposal that explores this geography may be considered if they demonstrate strong analytical relevance or comparative insights that enhance understanding of conflict dynamics in XCEPT's primary focus areas. Applicants are encouraged to clearly articulate how their proposed research connects to or complements XCEPT's existing work, particularly in terms of thematic or regional comparisons.

2.11 Is it acceptable to submit proposals in consortia (e.g., a non-profit with a for-profit research institute/university)?

Applications from consortia, partnerships or networks of two or more organisations are welcome. For all consortia, a lead organisation should be declared. A consortia that mixes for-profit and non-profit organisations is acceptable.

2.12 Can a newly established university research institution apply, without a track record, but founded by experienced experts?

All organisational applicants are asked to confirm that their organisation has a track record of: managing projects of equivalent scale; and engaging in the research area proposed.

2.13 Given that 30% of the scoring criteria is based on "academic credentials," are individual PhD students unlikely to be accepted, even if requesting a small budget (e.g., £15,000)?

XCEPT encourages applications from competent researchers, including PhD students. However, we expect Principal Investigators (PIs) to be academics, subject matter experts, or advanced practitioners actively engaged in research, policy, or programme work.

While PIs will typically hold a PhD, we also welcome applicants with equivalent academic or professional qualifications. For example, experienced policymakers or practitioners with deep expertise in relevant areas are encouraged to apply.

2.14 I am in my last year of PhD programme (I haven't yet passed my viva) and wanted to check with you whether I am eligible to be a PI on a small grant (GBP 15,000)?

XCEPT encourages applications from competent researchers, including PhD students. However, we expect Principal Investigators (PIs) to be academics, subject matter experts, or advanced practitioners actively engaged in research, policy, or programme work.

While PIs will typically hold a PhD, we also welcome applicants with equivalent academic or professional qualifications. For example, experienced policymakers or practitioners with deep expertise in relevant areas are encouraged to apply.

2.15 How can individual applicants demonstrate capacity to manage funds and responsibilities at this scale?

Individual applicants are welcome to apply. To demonstrate capacity to manage funds and responsibilities, we encourage applicants to briefly reference previous experience managing similar research projects or grants within the *Research Team* section of the Concept Note Application Form. This could include examples of overseeing budgets, coordinating research activities, or delivering outputs under donor-funded programmes. Sharing this experience will help reviewers assess your ability to manage the proposed work effectively.

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. Please note that application forms differ depending on whether you are applying as an individual or on behalf of an organisation.
- **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-G050 Policy response + [Name of lead (whether individual or organisation)]”.**

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

3.2 How do I apply as an individual? How do I apply as an organisation?

Application forms differ depending on whether you are applying as an individual or on behalf of an organisation. Please fill out the appropriate form:

- [Application form for individuals](#)
- [Application form for organisations](#)

Alongside the application form you will also need to provide CVs for the Principal Investigator and any Co-Investigators (maximum three CVs in total).

3.3 Is there a deadline for Concept Note submission?

Yes, the deadline is **Wednesday 17 September 2025 at 10:00 BST**.

3.4 In what language can proposals be submitted?

All applications and supporting documentation must be in English.

3.5 Can I submit more than one Concept Note?

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

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

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

3.7 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.

3.8 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 one month of the Concept Note submission deadline.

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 3-4 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.

In addition to the strength of individual submissions, some decisions may be made on a strategic basis across the programme, for example, based on geography or thematic area or to promote equity and inclusion.

3.11 How many projects will be funded?

We anticipate issuing **between four and eight awards** under this call, across a range of funding levels. The final number of awards may be higher or lower, depending on the scale, quality, and strategic fit of the proposals received. Final decisions will be made by the Selection Committee, which will take into account the overall balance and diversity of the portfolio of research, including thematic coverage, geographic focus, and methodological approaches.

Updated FAQs

3.12 Instead of submitting full CVs for additional team members, could we annex short bios for six team members alongside the PI's CV?

CVs must be provided for the Principal Investigator and any Co-Investigators (maximum three CVs in total). Other team members can be mentioned in the 'Research team' section of the Application Form. The maximum words for the Application Form is 1200 words.

3.13 What does "solicitation reference" mean in the declaration section?

This is the name of the call, so either 'C2-G050', and/or 'Policy responses to address conflict economies in borderlands'.

3.14 Are templates for both the budget and narrative available?

There is no separate template for the budget. However, the Concept Note Application Form includes a dedicated section for a summary budget, where applicants should provide a high-level breakdown of estimated costs across major categories (e.g. personnel, activities, equipment, etc.).

3.15 Does the P.I. need to be from the lead organization, or can the P.I. be affiliated with one of the co-leading organizations?

XCEPT does not require the Principal Investigator (PI) to be based at the lead institution. The PI may be affiliated with a co-leading organisation. However, regardless of affiliation, the PI must be able to effectively lead the research team and manage the project's delivery.

- 3.16 In order to ensure equity between northern and southern leadership of the research, and balance across the various thematic and geographic areas of expertise, would it be possible to structure our proposal as having two 'Joint-PIs', provided we are clear about their respective areas of responsibility and leadership?

Yes, it is acceptable to structure your proposal with two Joint Principal Investigators (Joint-PIs), particularly where this supports equitable leadership between northern and southern partners and reflects the thematic and geographic diversity of the research. However, please note that for organisational applications submitted by a consortium, a single lead organisation must be designated. This lead organisation will serve as the formal contract holder with Chemonics UK and will be responsible for overall grant management and reporting. The respective roles and responsibilities of the Joint-PIs should be clearly articulated in the proposal to ensure transparency and effective collaboration.

- 3.17 Is it necessary to name the sub-contractors (i.e., specific NGO/consultancy/individual person) in the concept note application, or can this information be provided only in the final application (if we are shortlisted)?

There is space in the 'Research Team' section of the concept note application form to mention sub-contractors, depending on the specific call you are applying for. However, it is not mandatory to name sub-contractors at the concept note stage if you do not believe it will strengthen your application. If shortlisted, you will have the opportunity to provide more detailed information—including naming specific NGOs, consultancies, or individuals—at the full proposal stage.

- 3.18 Regarding the full Project Proposal, what type of track record or samples of past performance are required? Should these relate specifically to the PI, the entire research team (PI + co-investigators), or the organisation(s) with which research team members are affiliated (e.g., their university)?

Shortlisted applicants will be asked to provide examples of past performance specifically relating to the lead organisation, as part of the final application. In addition, we will assess the experience and expertise of the proposed research team—including the Principal Investigator, Co-Investigators, and other key personnel—to evaluate their capacity to deliver the proposed research to a high standard. Applicants may also choose to highlight relevant institutional experience where it strengthens the case for capability and credibility, but the primary focus will be on the lead organisation and the individuals named in the research team.

- 3.19 Can the contact person requested to verify past performance be a research officer at the PI's university (assuming the PI and the research officer have previously collaborated to deliver a grant)?

The contact verifying past performance should be able to provide an objective reference. If a research officer at the PI's university is proposed, we would need to assess whether they can do so independently and without conflict of interest.

- 3.20 Is it acceptable for organisations to apply for multiple grant calls (e.g., this and the climate/conflict call)? Can we apply for other XCEPT calls as well, or is it limited to one per institution/person?

Yes, the same applicant can submit proposals to different XCEPT funding calls. There is no limit on the number of applications an Applicant may submit.

- 3.21 The rule that no organisation will be awarded more than one award as lead applicant — does this apply to each separate call?

No, the rule that no organisation or individual will be awarded more than one award as the lead applicant only applies to each funding call. It does not apply across different funding calls. For example, the same lead organisation could win an award for both the Policy Response call and the Multiple Centres call. But the same lead organisation cannot win two awards under the Policy Response call.

- 3.22 For the call for concept notes Policy responses to address conflict economies in borderlands calls I noticed that in the FAQs it states 'applicants may submit several Concept Notes, but no organisation will be awarded more than one award as the lead applicant'. If you submit as a lead and in a different consortium as a co-applicant, could you theoretically be eligible to be awarded two grants?

The restriction applies to the lead organisation – no organisation will be awarded more than one grant as the lead applicant. However, the same organisation may be involved in more than one successful bid, provided it is only the lead on one.

- 3.23 Is it possible to apply in more than one way — privately and as a consortium?

Yes, it is possible to apply in more than one way – for example, both as an individual and as part of a consortium. However, please note that for this call no individual or organisation can receive more than one award as the lead applicant.

4 Technical requirements

4.1 What are we looking for from this research?

This Call for Concept Notes seeks to generate analysis on policy responses or approaches that address the linkages between borderland conflict economies and the local, national and transnational drivers of conflict, as well as actionable recommendations for their improvement.

To encourage more tractable, policy-focused analysis, research might consider specific policy tools, mechanisms, or approaches deployed by local or national government actors, by regional or multilateral bodies, coalitions, or international intervention efforts, including bilateral donor programmes. Research should aim to surface actionable insights for policy stakeholders in the given contexts, while also demonstrating the applicability of findings to broader contexts.

Research should consider not only the past challenges and conditions shaping the success of these policy approaches or tools, but also those that are likely to be relevant going forward. This should include consideration of the resource-constrained environment for multilateral action and the need for greater reliance on supporting regional, national, and local responses.

Across all the research, an emphasis on how policies or interventions studied would affect or enable civilian and community agency in responding to conflict and conflict economies in borderlands is welcomed. Likewise, XCEPT encourages research that considers the role of and implications for men and women in the policies and interventions under study.

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 output of each award will be a high-quality paper, subject to external peer review and suitable for publication by the Awardee organisation or XCEPT, or prepared for submission to a peer-reviewed academic journal.

All projects should include policy-focused outputs, such as summary briefing notes and presentations to policy audiences. They should also 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 policy uptake and impact. XCEPT will also provide opportunities for successful applicants to showcase their research at XCEPT-hosted events and through private briefings to key government and policy stakeholders at relevant stages of the project cycle.

In addition, XCEPT may convene successful applicants to share and refine research plans, foster collaboration, and cultivate a community of research practice; XCEPT likewise may support collective presentation of research findings in a workshop or convening at the conclusion of research. Travel costs would be covered by XCEPT. XCEPT will work with author(s) to enable open access publication, in line with FCDO requirements.²

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.

Updated FAQs

4.5 The call emphasizes both academic rigor and policy relevance, which can sometimes be challenging to balance. How should proposals navigate this tension? Should journal-level research quality be prioritised even if it limits immediate policy applicability, or is there flexibility depending on project goals?

Proposals should aim for academic rigor, but there is flexibility in how this is delivered. Whether the output is a journal-quality article or a think tank-style policy study, the key is that the research is robust and contributes meaningfully to public knowledge. You do not need to produce detailed policy recommendations; rather, the research should generate insights that help inform policy and programme development. This call focuses on understanding complex conflict systems and identifying programmatic and policy responses, so applicants should consider the tools and approaches best suited to that goal.

4.6 Do the policies or interventions under investigation have to be formal (sanctioned by a government/authority), or can research explore community-based/non-state responses to illicit economies/conflict in borderlands?

No, the policies or interventions under investigation do not need to be formal or state-led. The call welcomes research on community-based and non-state responses, especially given the focus on conflict economies and informal systems in borderlands. We are interested in how both formal and informal interventions affect communities, and particularly in how these different types of responses interact.

² See FCDO's (formerly DFID's) [Open and Enhanced Access Policy](#).

- 4.7 Could you define borderland/cross-border area more clearly? Does this mean very specific locations at the borders, or can it be understood more broadly as areas with connections and conflict dynamics flowing across borders?

We are open to different conceptions of borderlands, and applicants should briefly explain their conceptual framework and how their chosen geography fits within this framing. XCEPT is also interested in understanding flows across borders – such as the movement of people, goods, and resources – and how these shape or intensify conflict economies.

- 4.8 Can the comparative analysis be based on case studies within a single conflict-affected borderland area (e.g., DRC–Uganda or Kenya–Somalia), exploring differences and similarities between local scenarios, or does it need to feature entirely different geographies?

It can focus on a single conflict-affected borderlands area.

- 4.9 Given that borderlands often involve “interconnected political economies,” is XCEPT interested in research that examines how non-state governance systems (e.g., armed groups, tribal councils, informal trade networks) interact with or compete against state institutions?

Understanding governance systems and centre–periphery relations and how these influence conflict is central to XCEPT’s research to date.

- 4.10 When you talk about recommending policy responses, to which actors are you referring: borderland states, regional/international organisations, or the UK Government?

Policy recommendations can be directed to a range of actors, including community-based groups, local and state authorities, regional bodies, international organisations, and the UK Government. There is flexibility depending on the focus of your research and the relevance of the findings to different stakeholders.

- 4.11 Does XCEPT have a stronger appetite for findings aimed at international donors, or for those that speak directly to regional/national governments that exercise direct operational control over checkpoints and trade regimes?

The key focus is on policies and approaches that directly address conflict economies and their links to conflict drivers. XCEPT is especially interested in research that grapples with the constraints facing multi- and bilateral interventions, including the growing reliance on locally or regionally driven responses. While we’re looking for analysis of concrete policies, proposals should also consider how findings can be broadly applicable across contexts. As a public good research programme, XCEPT supports work that draws general insights from specific cases, rather than traditional programme evaluations.

- 4.12 To shape findings effectively, what does “actionable insights” mean for XCEPT? Are they looking for recommendations that drive short-term local/national policy changes, or are longer-term/transnational recommendations equally valued?

For XCEPT, “actionable insights” are less about driving immediate policy changes and more about shifting how people understand a problem or a proposed intervention. We value research that challenges assumptions, reframes issues, and informs longer-term thinking—especially in complex, conflict-affected contexts. That said, short-term, locally relevant recommendations are also valuable, and proposals can include both. The key is that findings should be useful to policy and programme actors, whether by influencing current decisions or shaping future approaches.

- 4.13 The focus of the funding call is on policy tools. How much scope is there for supporting research aimed at strengthening evidence-based policy responses (i.e., testing how to build a stronger evidence base and use this to inform policy in complex conflict-affected contexts)?

XCEPT has done a lot of research on complex conflict systems. While understanding those dynamics is important, the emphasis of this call is on the tools and approaches used to respond to them—not on analysing the conflict itself as the main focus.

- 4.14 The description states the call is designed to respond to and build on past borderland research highlighted in XCEPT-supported work. Does a proposal need to link to a specific previous piece of research, or just relate to a broadly similar topic/area?

No, proposals do not need to link to a specific piece of previous research. The call is designed to build on and respond to themes and insights from past XCEPT-supported research, but this can be interpreted broadly. Proposals should relate to similar topics or areas and demonstrate how they contribute to or extend existing learning, rather than referencing a particular study.

- 4.15 The call notes that many policy frameworks “fail to take a truly transnational conflict ecosystems approach.” What criteria will XCEPT apply to assess whether proposed research adequately addresses this transnational dimension?

There is no specific criteria for assessing the transnational dimension, but proposals should clearly engage with the themes described in the call, particularly how conflict economies evolve within borderlands and how they create transnational linkages between conflict drivers across borders, regions, and even globally, across licit and illicit supply chains. Proposals should demonstrate how their research addresses these cross-border linkages and contributes to understanding or improving policy responses within such interconnected systems.

- 4.16 Prior studies highlight that some interventions or components of broader initiatives may be counterproductive. Would XCEPT encourage concept notes that explicitly present the possible unintended consequences of major policy tools, rather than only their potential successes?

Yes, XCEPT encourages research that explores the unintended consequences of policy tools, not just their successes. We are particularly interested in findings that help reframe how interventions are understood, even if they challenge prevailing assumptions. Anything that contributes to the development of more effective, context-sensitive approaches—including identifying risks or limitations—is valuable to the programme.

- 4.17 In high-risk geographies, would XCEPT consider designs that rely on diaspora interviews or network analysis in lieu of in-country fieldwork, if rigor and policy relevance can be demonstrated? More broadly, how do you define “field data collection” in the context of this call?

XCEPT welcomes diverse methodological approaches, provided they are rigorous and ethically sound. In high-risk geographies, designs based on diaspora interviews or network analysis may be acceptable if clearly justified. Applicants should use the application form to explain and substantiate their chosen methods.

We understand ‘field data collection’ to refer to data gathered in the locations relevant to the research, through direct engagement with affected populations, institutions, or environments. This could include remote interviews, provided they are conducted with actors directly relevant to the research context.

- 4.18 I wanted to seek clarification regarding the guidance on the larger study (£120k) on mixed methods and comparative case studies. Specifically, would a combination such as Iraq and Syria suffice to meet this requirement? Or would you envisage the inclusion of additional countries for the study to be considered sufficiently comparative, or more aligned with what you expect the comparative element of the larger research scope to cover?

It is not about the number of countries included, but rather about the scale, scope, and potential impact of the research. A study focusing on Iraq and Syria could qualify for the larger (£120k) award if it offers a robust mixed-methods approach and generates meaningful comparative insights. What matters most is whether the research can shift understanding, inform policy, or challenge existing assumptions about conflict economies and cross-border dynamics. The proposed budget should be proportionate to the ambition and depth of the research.

- 4.19 I would like to apply to this with a Co-Investigator at a university in another country. They would employ an experienced team of local researchers from their region to conduct field research. Would that have an impact on where the ethical research clearance needs to take place, i.e. would that be at my university in the UK or at the university in the other country?

It is the responsibility of the applicant and their collaborators to obtain any ethical approvals required to undertake the proposed research. This includes determining whether clearance is needed from Sussex, Chiang Mai University, or another relevant institution, depending on the nature of the research and where it is being conducted. Applicants should ensure that all ethical considerations are addressed appropriately in their proposal.

- 4.20 Is it accurate that the outcome could be a policy paper geared towards a think tank and not necessarily an academic peer-reviewed study?

The primary output does not need to be an academic paper. It could also take the form of a policy paper or think tank-style report, as long as it is high-quality, rigorous, and suitable for external peer review.

- 4.21 How does the committee define “meaningful participation” for Global South researchers?

“Meaningful participation” by Global South researchers means more than involvement – it requires active decision-making power throughout the research process. This includes shaping the study design, implementation, analysis, publication, and dissemination. Proposals can meet this standard in different ways, such as having a Global South organisation as the lead partner, or ensuring that Global South researchers hold leadership roles and control a significant portion of the budget (over 33%). The key is that their contribution is substantive and central, not limited to data collection or logistical support.

5 Geographies

- 5.1 Is there a preferred geographic focus for proposals?

The proposed research should concentrate on conflict-affected borderlands and cross-border conflict dynamics in XCEPT's core geographies:

- 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 Would a proposal examining the Cambodia–Thailand borderlands be eligible under the conflict-affected borderlands focus? / Is Bangladesh eligible for this call? / Is Rwanda eligible for this call? / We are an NGO in Colombia with border issues with Venezuela. Is it possible to apply?

XCEPT welcomes submissions that explore geographies offering clear comparative value to its core areas of research. While these areas are not currently among XCEPT's core geographies, proposals that include these geographies may be considered if they demonstrate strong analytical relevance or comparative insights that enhance understanding of conflict dynamics in XCEPT's primary focus areas.

- 5.3 Would a project on South Sudan, Sudan, and CAR — not entirely within XCEPT core regions — be considered? / Ghana is not considered a conflict economy but shares borders with conflict economies (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger). Is Ghana eligible in this context?

These countries are all of interest to XCEPT and will be considered. XCEPT especially welcomes submissions that explore geographies offering clear comparative value to its core areas of research.

- 5.4 Since Afghanistan and Pakistan are listed together, does a proposal need to cover both, or is a Pakistan-only study acceptable?

A Pakistan-only study is acceptable. What's important is that the research engages with the key themes of the call – namely policy and programme interventions in conflict-affected borderlands, and the challenges related to conflict economies and how licit/illicit economic activity intersects with conflict and governance in borderlands.

- 5.5 Can borderland economies include frontlines inside a country experiencing instability or power struggles, such as Lebanon?

We are open to different conceptions of borderlands, and applicants should briefly explain their conceptual framework and how their chosen geography fits within this framing.

5.6 Can you clarify how narrowly or expansively you view Myanmar's borderlands as extending into its neighbours?

We are open to different conceptions of borderlands, and applicants should briefly explain their conceptual framework and how their chosen geography fits within this framing.

5.7 If working in the MENA region, should research cover four countries, or can it focus on only two areas?

Research can cover one country or multiple countries.

5.8 Are Senegal, Nigeria, and Cameroon included within "Coastal West Africa and the Sahel"?

Yes, Senegal, Nigeria, and Cameroon are included within "Coastal West Africa and the Sahel."

5.9 Will projects that include borderlands where one country is not listed in the XCEPT focal areas (but others are) be downmarked in scoring?

No, such proposals will not necessarily be downmarked. XCEPT welcomes submissions that include borderlands where only one country falls within the programme's core geographies. Proposals may include other regions if they offer strong analytical relevance or comparative insights that enhance understanding of conflict dynamics in XCEPT's primary focus areas.

5.10 Would a proposal focusing on a geography outside the core geographies, but with comparative case studies involving core regions, be scored as highly as one focusing on a core geography with outside comparisons?

Such proposals may be scored as highly. XCEPT welcomes submissions that focus on geographies outside the core areas, provided they include comparative case studies involving core regions and offer strong analytical relevance. Proposals should demonstrate how insights from non-core geographies enhance understanding of responses to conflict in XCEPT's primary focus areas.

6 Budget

6.1 How much funding is available?

We anticipate issuing **between four and eight awards** under this call, across a range of funding levels. The final number of awards may be higher or lower, depending on the scale, quality, and strategic fit of the proposals received. Final decisions will be made by

the Selection Committee, which will take into account the overall balance and diversity of the portfolio of research, including thematic coverage, geographic focus, and methodological approaches.

Applicants are encouraged to consider the appropriate scale for their project, bearing in mind the following indicative funding brackets:

- **Up to £15,000** – For desk-based research papers (sole or co-authored) drawing primarily on existing literature, data, and analysis. These projects are not expected to involve field data collection but may include remote interviews.
- **£15,000–£40,000** – For projects that include field data collection. At the lower end of the scale this may involve key informant interviews requiring travel; at the higher end it may involve interviews, surveys or field-based case studies in one or two locations.
- **£40,000–£80,000** – For projects involving more substantial field data collection, potentially across multiple sites or countries, and delivering more extensive outputs.
- **£80,000–£120,000** – For projects proposing a portfolio of research activities across multiple sites, potentially involving mixed methods and multiple outputs that offer comparative case studies in different geographies or address a more complex array of interventions.

Concept notes should explain the justification for higher budgets relative to the contribution to XCEPT objectives, scholarship, and policy.

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 demonstrate 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.

Please note that application forms (and accompanying budget tables) differ depending on whether you are applying as an individual or on behalf of an organisation.

Updated FAQs

6.3 Are short-term dissemination/field visits allowed with the small grant (£15,000)? The description for this type of grant focuses on desk research and secondary data sources for analysis and/or online interviews (if applicable), but does this mean that in-country visits are not eligible for the budget?

Field visits and dissemination activities can be included in your budget. The funding levels provided in the call are indicative – not prescriptive. Applicants should propose a budget

that reflects what is genuinely needed to deliver their project effectively. If field visits are essential to your research design, even for a small grant, then you are welcome to include them, as long as the costs are well justified and proportionate to the overall scope of work.

6.4 At the concept note stage, can a proposal be designed to scale up or down across the four funding levels (e.g., from 1 to 3 comparative contexts)?

We prefer to receive proposals that are pitched at a specific funding level, but you may briefly indicate how the proposal could be scaled up or down across different funding levels.

6.5 With regard to staff costs, does the funding cover them?

Yes, the budget should cover all costs required to carry out the research.

6.6 Could you clarify what categories of costs the budget can cover? Can it include staff time for researchers, or only research activities (fieldwork, travel, data collection, dissemination)?

Yes, the budget can cover staff time for researchers.

6.7 Is there scope to include supporting researchers and project officers/managers in the budget, beyond the PI and up to two co-investigators?

Yes, the budget should cover all costs required to carry out the research.

6.8 What kind of equipment is allowed to buy?

It is expected that researchers and institutions provide their own IT equipment such as mobile phones and laptops. In exceptional circumstances these can be included in the budget, but strong justification will be required.

6.9 Which costs are eligible? Are institutional overheads, indirect costs, and salary costs eligible?

Yes, these costs are all eligible, but they should represent value for money.

6.10 What is the cap on overhead costs for this call?

There is no fixed cap on overhead costs, but they should be proportionate to the overall budget and demonstrate value for money. Applicants should briefly describe what their overheads include in the budget breakdown to support assessment of their appropriateness.

6.11 How should indirect costs or overheads in the budget be presented — as separate items or embedded within categories with justification?

We prefer to see indirect or overhead costs as separate items, so we can assess their appropriateness.

6.12 Are universities expected to use Full Economic Costing?

UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) may use Full Economic Costing (FEC) when preparing budgets. However, we expect non-project attributable costs (NPAC) to be proportionate to the total budget. We would expect to see a breakdown of the budget and would then make an assessment on the proportionality of NPAC.

7 Contract

7.1 With whom are contracts signed?

Successful applicants will be contracted directly by Chemonics UK, which manages the XRF. The type of contract issued will depend on the nature of the applicant – whether an individual or an organisation – and, in the case of organisations, their legal status (e.g. for-profit or not-for-profit).

- For organisational applications submitted by a **consortium**, a lead organisation must be designated. This lead organisation will serve as the formal contract holder with Chemonics UK.
- For individual applications with **co-investigators**, XCEPT prefers that co-investigators be engaged as subcontractors under the lead's contract.

If the arrangement described above raise significant complications, then we can consider alternative mechanisms.

7.2 What is the average contract length?

XCEPT anticipates these awards will run for a maximum of 12 months.

7.3 When are the projects likely to start?

XCEPT anticipates these 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 Do research assistants have to be contracted through the institution where the PI is based, or can they be contracted through the CI's institution?

Yes, research assistants can be contracted through either the Principal Investigator's (PI) institution or the Co-Investigator's (CI) institution. XCEPT does not have a preference, as long as the arrangement is clearly outlined and managed appropriately within the project budget.

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 **3 September 2025 at 13:00-14:00**. 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/37decac8-ae95-41c8-b3d2-6c5546ebb314@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 **Monday 8 September 2025, 10:00 BST**.