UK Government to fund international Covid-19 studies in Scotland

The UK Government is investing £7.2 million in twenty research projects across the UK, including the universities of Edinburgh and Strathclyde, to help provide developing countries with sustainable solutions to respond to Covid-19 and future pandemics.

One of these projects, led by the University of Edinburgh's Dr Thomas Molony, will receive £367,000 to investigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on elections in Africa.

Working in partnership with colleagues in the Central African Republic, Ghana and Tanzania, the study will find ways to protect the electorate from Covid-19 transmission.

The project team – comprising of country specialists, leading public health researchers, and election experts – plan to investigate multiple stages of each election, tracking patterns of turnout and using surveys (with gender-balanced samples) to investigate attitudes towards voting so that any emergent gender inequality is highlighted.

The University of Strathclyde project, led by Dr Pratima Sambajee, will receive £199,579 in funding to look at how Covid-19 has impacted workers' rights in Mauritius and how improvements can be made.

The hardest hit are workers in tourism and hospitality, textile factories and the informal economy. Examples include reduced compensation, withholding of workers' annual leave and exemption from negotiations with workers' organisations (unions) by employers prior to reduction of the workforce.

UK Government Minster for Scotland, Iain Stewart said:

> These remarkable projects will play a critical role in helping to address the issue of Covid-19 transmission at elections in the developing world and help ensure workers' rights are protected.
>
> Adapting to the risks of Covid-19 has been especially hard for the world's most vulnerable communities.
>
> It's great news that Scottish researchers are helping the international community respond to the pandemic and making an impact tackling Covid-19 globally.

UK Business Secretary Alok Sharma said:

> Defeating coronavirus is a truly global endeavour, which is why

> we’re backing Britain’s scientists and researchers to work with their international counterparts to find tech solutions to treat and combat this virus around the world.
>
> By backing these pioneering research projects in Scotland, we are equipping some of the most vulnerable communities with the resources they need to tackle pandemics now and in the future.

Dr Thomas Molony, Director, Centre of African Studies at Edinburgh University said:

> Elections give people the opportunity to shape the future of their societies. Such decisions are crucial in the context of Covid-19, which has drastically affected lives around the globe.
>
> A number of elections are still due to take place this year in Africa, and there are a further 18 elections are scheduled for 2021.
>
> By working to reduce the risks of Covid-19 transmission during elections, we’re contributing towards one of the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): to ensure healthy lives and promote the wellbeing for all at all ages.
>
> We are also interested in democracy. The Covid-19 pandemic has the potential for democratic back-sliding, where the quality and legitimacy of elections are undermined – either unintentionally because of safety measures, or intentionally where incumbents seek to instrumentalise the virus through authoritarian measures designed to benefit themselves.

Other projects receiving UK Government funding include delivering mass vaccination capacity in Bangladesh, protective equipment for refugees in Jordan and remote healthcare access for patients in Nigeria.

The £7.2 million UK government funding will be managed by UK aid programmes, the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and the Newton Fund.

The funding follows the launch of the government’s ambitious R&D Roadmap in July, which committed to boosting international collaboration in research and development and establishing global scientific partnerships that will create health, social and economic benefits across the world.