

## XCEPT Call for Concept Notes

### Climate Change, Informal Trade, and Instability in Conflict-affected Borderlands

XCEPT is commissioning research on the relationship between climate change, informal trade networks, and instability in conflict-affected borderlands.

Key information	
<b>Award number:</b>	C2-G052
<b>Programme Name:</b>	Cross-border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme
<b>Implemented by:</b>	Chemonics UK
<b>Funded by:</b>	UK International Development, via the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)
<b>Call for Concept Notes issue date:</b>	Thursday 21 August 2025
<b>Q&amp;A session:</b>	Friday 5 September 2025, 10:30-11:30 BST
<b>Clarification questions deadline:</b>	Tuesday 9 September 2025, 18:00 BST
<b>Submission deadline:</b>	<b>Tuesday 16 September 2025, 10:00 BST</b>
<b>Email for electronic submissions:</b>	<a href="mailto:xcept-fund@chemonics.com">xcept-fund@chemonics.com</a>
<b>Contract type:</b>	Grant agreement or contract
<b>Likely total number of awards:</b>	One
<b>Value of each award:</b>	£120,000 GBP
<b>Period of performance of each award:</b>	12 months
<b>Estimated start date:</b>	December 2025
<b>Point of contact:</b>	Benjamin Castro, <a href="mailto:xcept-fund@chemonics.com">xcept-fund@chemonics.com</a>

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# 1 Introduction

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 rigorous public good research to advance scholarship and inform policies and programmes that support peace. The programme includes the XCEPT Research Fund (XRF) to commission high-quality new research.

The XCEPT Research Fund (XRF) is inviting applications for up to **£120,000 GBP of funding for a 12-month project** that will produce innovative, empirically grounded research examining the relationship between climate change, informal trade networks, and instability in conflict-affected borderlands, with a focus on the role of informal cross-border trade in the causal pathways linking climate stress to instability and conflict.

# 2 Background

Weak governance, climate stress, and informal cross-border activities often converge in conflict-affected borderlands, influencing both local survival strategies and broader patterns of conflict and instability. When governments are absent or ineffective in mitigating conflict and climate stressors, communities often fill the gap. XCEPT-supported research indicates that during periods of intense climate stress and resultant livelihood insecurity, communities turn to informal (and at times illicit) cross-border economic activities as an adaptation measure. For example, during droughts, herders in western Tunisia smuggle their cattle across the border to sell it in Algeria. Via the same routes, food enters Tunisia from Algeria to cope with harvest failures.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, XCEPT-supported research has highlighted how cross-border trade in response to climate stresses contributes to reshaping gender roles in cross-border conflict systems, with women increasingly taking on responsibilities traditionally associated with men.<sup>2</sup> These cross-border activities are often essential for survival, but their expansion during climate extremes may also create new risks.

While cross-border informal trade networks can serve as lifelines during climate shocks, they can also be exploited by non-state armed groups (NSAGs) operating in and beyond border areas. On the one hand, informal cross-border trade may be a source of income and goods during crises, helping communities adapt and potentially reduce resource-based grievances. On the other hand, climate stress might fuel informal trade networks run by criminal groups, insurgents, and other NSAGs. Such networks may contribute to political instability by strengthening the revenues, legitimacy, and capacities of NSAGs. For example, NSAGs might partner with local communities to operate these trade networks, gaining both resources and political legitimacy. In some cases, they might play a key role in environmental governance. In others, they might coerce communities or monopolise the

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<sup>1</sup> Meddeb H. "[Tunisia's Climate Crisis, Economic Downturn, and Growing Dependency on Algeria](#)". Malcom H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Mulli AS. "[Exploring the gender-climate-conflict nexus in conflict-affected borderlands in the Horn of Africa](#)". London: XCEPT, 2024



benefits, leaving borderland populations more exposed to violence and climate and economic shocks.<sup>3</sup>

The consequences of these dynamics for peace, security, and long-term climate resilience remain poorly understood. In particular, there is limited evidence on:

- How informal, cross-border trade functions as a strategy for climate change adaptation in conflict-affected borderlands.
- How the expansion of informal trade networks, driven by climate extremes, may contribute to conflict and instability.

Understanding these complex dynamics lies at the heart of current research on the climate–conflict nexus. Recent studies show that climate change is reshaping the peace and security landscape, creating new opportunities for violent extremism to take root.<sup>4</sup> NSAGs are not only exploiting these shifts but are also actively engaging in forms of adaptation and risk management as part of their local governance strategies.<sup>5</sup> Yet the implications of these activities for local communities remain underexplored, particularly in conflict-affected borderlands where communities are especially exposed to cross-border illicit activities. Addressing this gap is crucial for shaping policies that foster sustainable adaptation, strengthen community resilience, and prevent the escalation of violence in fragile borderland regions.

### 3 Description of the research to be commissioned

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.

<sup>3</sup> Mouratidi Y. “[Engaging armed groups on environmental protection and climate change: current challenges, approaches and looking to the future](#)”. Armed Groups and International Law. November 21, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Krampe F and de Coning C. “[Climate Change, Environmental Peacebuilding, and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism](#)” in *Resilience, Peacebuilding and Preventing Violent Extremism*, de Coning C, Saraiva R, and Muto A, eds. London: Routledge, 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Cunningham KG et al. “[Rebel Governance in the Age of Climate Change](#)”. Cambridge University Press, 2025.



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.

## **Approach**

We encourage a comparative approach that allows for examination of the three interlinked research questions through a limited number of cases. Case selection should be designed to facilitate structured comparisons – for example, between areas experiencing different levels or types of armed violence, climate vulnerability, or governance.

We encourage interdisciplinary approaches that may draw from political science, sociology, anthropology, environmental studies, gender studies, geography, development studies, or related fields. The successful project is expected to make a meaningful contribution to academic debates on climate adaptation and the climate–conflict nexus, while also raising policy relevant considerations. Proposals should demonstrate methodological rigour, including planning for qualitative and/or quantitative data collection and analysis. This should include approaches to conflict and gender sensitivity, how researchers will access hard-to-reach areas or collect data on sensitive topics, and how risks to participants and researchers will be mitigated

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.

## **Geographic scope**

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.

## **Expected 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.



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.<sup>6</sup>

## 4 Funding levels

Through this call we expect to fund **one project**, with a maximum budget of £120,000.

## 5 Who can apply

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.

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.

Applicants must indicate in the Concept Note 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 such approval and provide relevant proof to XCEPT before any funds can be dispersed.

Please note:

- Applications from **consortia**, partnerships or networks of two or more organisations are welcome. For all consortia, a lead organisation should be declared.
- Applicant organisations can be either **for-profit or not-for-profit**.
- Researchers and research organisations based in or from countries in the **Global South** are encouraged to apply, independently or in partnership with researchers or research organisations based in the Global North. Applications by – or in

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<sup>6</sup> See FCDO's (formerly DFID's) [Open and Enhanced Access Policy](#).



partnership with – Global South researchers or research organisations will be scored more favourably.<sup>7</sup>

- **Government bodies** (national, regional or local) are not eligible for this opportunity. This exclusion does not apply to publicly funded, independent, and non-political research institutes, which may be eligible provided they meet the other criteria outlined in this call.
- 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.
- Any organisation applying for funding must be an organisation incorporated or legally organised under the laws of its place of business and must have the proper licenses or registration or be able to obtain the necessary approvals to deliver the services required.
- Applicants must be able to comply with the ethical and business conduct requirements outlined in Section 10 'Ethical and business conduct requirements', and the [Chemonics' Supplier Code of Conduct](#), which is based on the [FCDO Code of Conduct](#).

All applicants are asked to confirm that their organisation has a track record of:

- Managing projects of equivalent scale.
- Engaging in the research area proposed.

For more information, please refer to the Concept Note Application Form.

## 6 How to apply

The application process involves two stages: Concept Note and full Project Proposal. A description of the application and award process is provided below, with estimated dates.

Date	XCEPT Application Process
21 August 2025	<b>Stage One:</b> Call for Concept Notes published
5 September 2025	Q&A session
9 September 2025	Clarification questions deadline
11 September 2025	Updated FAQs published
16 September 2025	Concept Note submission deadline
Early October 2025	<b>Stage Two:</b> Shortlisted applicants invited to submit full Project Proposals
Late October 2025	Project Proposal submission deadline

<sup>7</sup> 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.



November 2025	Due diligence and Project Proposal assessment and award
December 2025	Kick off

## Stage One: Concept Note

The Concept Note stage enables applicants to outline their research idea and approach to enable XCEPT to determine who should be invited to submit full Project Proposals.

### i) Concept Note preparation and submission

To apply, applicants should prepare and submit the following:

- **Concept Note Application Form** (max. 1200 words). The concept note should demonstrate how the proposed research addresses the objectives outlined in this call. References to relevant literature should be included as footnotes, which will not count towards the word limit. The Concept Note should include the following (word limits are indicative):
  - **Research idea and evidence gap** (600 words), including a statement of the project's focus and the problem or issue(s) it will address, the research questions and hypotheses, potential contribution to the field (both policy and scholarship), and brief overview of the current evidence gaps in relation to the research idea, with reference to the relevant literature.
  - **Methodology** (300 words), including the empirical strategy and methods the research will employ, why they are appropriate, and the timeline for delivery. Ethical considerations and institutional review processes should also be included here, including the plan for obtaining ethics approval.
  - **Expected outputs** (100 words), such as papers, policy briefing notes, events, blogs, podcasts, videos, and data sets. The anticipated publication pathway or outlet(s) should be included.
  - **Research team** (200 words), including the track record of the Principal Investigator / team, and the extent to which individuals and/or organisations from the Global South lead and meaningfully participate during different stages of the research cycle, from research design to data collection, analysis, validation, authoring, and uptake.
  - **Summary budget.** Please provide 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.

The Concept Note Application Form should be submitted as a Microsoft Word document. Only applications in English will be reviewed. Footnote references will not count towards the word limit.

- **Curricula Vitae (CVs).** CVs must be provided for the Principal Investigator and any Co-Investigators (maximum three CVs in total). Each CV should ideally not exceed two pages and should include a list of relevant publications, if applicable.





The completed Concept Note Application Form and CV(s) should be submitted via email to [XCEPT-Fund@chemonics.com](mailto:XCEPT-Fund@chemonics.com) by the date specified in the 'Key information' table at the top of this document. 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]"**.

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

XCEPT will endeavour to answer clarification questions from applicants at any point during the application process. Those questions and answers that XCEPT feels would be useful for all applicants will be incorporated into an FAQs document. Any questions that you would like addressed should be submitted to [XCEPT-Fund@chemonics.com](mailto:XCEPT-Fund@chemonics.com).

## ii) Concept Note assessment and evaluation

This step is led by members of the Selection Committee and the XCEPT team. It will consist of an eligibility screening followed by a review and assessment of the Concept Notes, according to the Evaluation Criteria detailed in Section 7 of this document ('How will your Concept Note be assessed?').

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

Applicants will be notified of the evaluation result by email. We expect to notify applicants within 3 weeks of Concept Note submission.

We will not be able to provide feedback on unsuccessful concept notes.

## Stage Two: Project Proposal

Shortlisted applicants will be invited to submit a full Project Proposal following Concept Note evaluation.

### i) Project Proposal preparation and submission

Shortlisted applicants 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 at this stage.

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

### ii) Due diligence

FCDO requires all award holders to be subject to due diligence and risk assessment. This process will run in parallel to the assessment of the Project Proposals. No final award decision will be taken before this has been completed.

### iii) Project Proposal assessment and award

The Project Proposal Selection Committee will make a final decision to make awards based on the proposed projects, the due diligence assessments and risk assessments, and the shape of the overall portfolio.





Chemonics UK will finalise the award with each award holder, taking into consideration feedback from the Selection Committee and the due diligence and risk assessment. The onboarding process is expected to run from November–December 2025.

## 7 How will your Concept Note be assessed?

Concept Note applications will be assessed by members of the Selection Committee and the XCEPT team. Applications will be judged based on the criteria below. **Please note that this evaluation criteria should be considered as a guide only.**

Evaluation criteria	Scoring
<b>Research idea and evidence gaps</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relevance to the themes, questions, and XCEPT focus geographies described in this call.</li> <li>Clarity of the proposal, clear description of the conceptual framework, and precision of the research question(s).</li> <li>Originality of the proposed topic, awareness of existing literature and evidence gaps.</li> <li>Consideration and integration of relevant gender dimensions.</li> </ul>	<b>40</b>
<b>Methodology</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Aptness of the methods proposed, including rigour and robustness of the empirical strategy to address research questions and test hypotheses and of the approach to data collection and analysis.</li> <li>Feasibility of the methodological approach, based on the time and budget proposed.</li> <li>Robustness of quality assurance processes built into the design, implementation, writing, and dissemination of the research proposed.</li> <li>Aptness and robustness of approach to ensuring ethical research standards throughout the project cycle.</li> <li>Integration of gender- and conflict-sensitive research practices from design to implementation.</li> <li>Feasibility and realism of plan for accomplishing the deliverables and delivering on time and within budget.</li> <li>Relevance and aptness of proposed outputs for academic and policy impact.</li> </ul>	<b>30</b>
<b>Research team</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Academic credentials and experience delivering research related to the research idea.</li> <li>Track record using the proposed methodology.</li> <li>Relevance of existing networks for research access.</li> <li>Evidence of ability to produce rigorous, high-quality research outputs.</li> <li>Extent to which individuals and/or organisations from the Global South lead and meaningfully participate across the research cycle, from research design to data collection, analysis, authoring, and uptake.</li> </ul>	<b>30</b>



<b>Total score</b>	<b>100</b>
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## 8 Contracting

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.

They will be expected to report their progress on a regular basis, for example through quarterly narrative and financial reporting.

XRF awards are made under the authority of FCDO Standard Terms and Conditions, and [Chemonics' Supplier Code of Conduct](#), based on the [FCDO Code of Conduct](#). The XRF is required to ensure that all organisations receiving FCDO funding comply with the guidance found in the regulations referenced above, as applicable to the respective terms and conditions of their awards.

FCDO retains the right to reject Chemonics' proposal of any successful applicant and terminate, in whole or in part, a subsequent award at any time.

This call does not establish an obligation for Chemonics UK to fund any activity or provide any awards to any applicants.

## 9 Q&A session and clarification questions

To learn more about this funding opportunity, please join the **virtual question and answer (Q&A) session** on the date specified in the 'Key Information' table at the top of this call.

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>

If you have any **clarification questions**, please ask them at the Q&A or email them to the Point of Contact by the deadline date specified in the 'Key Information' table at the top of this call. Ethical and business conduct requirements

## 10 Ethical and business conduct requirements

Chemonics is committed to integrity in procurement, and only selects grantees based on objective business criteria such as technical merit and value for money.

Chemonics does not tolerate fraud, collusion among applicants, falsified proposals/bids, bribery, or kickbacks. Any firm or individual violating these standards will be disqualified from this solicitation process, barred from future opportunities, and may be reported to both our Office of Business Conduct and FCDO.

Programme and Chemonics employees may not ask for, and applicants are prohibited from offering, any money, fee, commission, credit, gift, gratuity, thing of value, or compensation



to obtain or reward improper favourable treatment regarding this solicitation. Any improper request from a programme employee should be reported to [BusinessConduct@chemonics.com](mailto:BusinessConduct@chemonics.com).

Applicants responding to this Call must sign the declaration included at the end of the Application Form, to include the following as part of the proposal submission:

- Disclose any close, familial, or financial relationships with Chemonics or project staff. For example, if an offeror's cousin is employed by the project, the offeror must state this.
- Disclose any family or financial relationship with other offerors submitting proposals. For example, if the offeror's father owns a company that is submitting another proposal, the offeror must state this.
- Certify that the prices in the application have been arrived at independently, without any consultation, communication, or agreement with any other applicant or competitor for the purpose of restricting competition.
- Certify that all information in the proposal and all supporting documentation are authentic and accurate.
- Certify understanding and agreement to Chemonics' prohibitions against fraud, bribery and kickbacks.

