DOING RESEARCH – ASSESSING THE ENVIRONMENT FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES[1]

Pilot Synthesis & Scale-Up Workshop
26-27 May 2016, Brighton, UK

Workshop Summary

The Global Development Network organized a Pilot Synthesis & Scale-Up Workshop in the scope of its “Doing Research” program, on 26-27 May in Brighton, UK. The workshop gathered 17 participants, 10 of which were from the program and seven were new program stakeholders. This collaborative seminar acted as a stepping stone for the first step towards scaling-up the Doing Research program. It aimed at taking stock of lessons from the pilot phase, presenting a synthesis of approaches to assess the research environment, discuss with insights from other initiatives and practices, and finally engage into an exploratory work to define the conceptual and normative dimensions that the final assessment tool will apply.

The workshop’s main output was a defined conceptual framework referring to the research environment as the system that shapes the process of doing research. Five categories were proposed to include all the relevant criteria to characterize a performing research environment. These are inputs, process, outputs, outcome and context. The definitions for each category are given in the paragraph on Session 7.

The present document firstly reports on the activities that took place at the workshop. It then captures its essential points before concluding on the questions that were left to move forward with the program.

I. ACTIVITIES AND SESSIONS

Sessions 1, 2, 3 and 4 took place on the first day and aimed at providing fundamental understanding of the pilot phase and the task at hand. Sessions 5, 6, 7 and 8 took place on the second day and were focused on practical work on the framework developed at the end of the first day.

[1] The Doing Research program is generously supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Agence Française de Développement (AFD), French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

Session 1: Highlights from the pilot phase approaches

Three teams from the pilot phase presented the diametrically opposed approaches they used to measure the research environment. Maria Balarin (GRADE, Peru) offered a qualitative view to understand the process of doing research. Alban Ahouré (CAPEC, Cote d'Ivoire) gave insights into the development of a quantitative Doing Research index, based on seven dimensions of the research environment. Fajri Siregar (CIPG, Indonesia) proposed a mixed method approach focused on understanding the research environment at its micro, meso and macro levels.[2]

Session 2: Synthesis of the Doing Research pilot phase

The presentation of the draft synthesis by Benjamin Buclet (CREED, France) included a brief review of all the pilot case studies, and analyzed thematic aspects that arose from the synthesis exercise. It asked a number of normative questions regarding the choices to be made in the design of the assessment tool. Those were about defining the boundaries of the research environment, the most relevant level of analysis, the balance between production of research by public and private actors, and the choice of a reference for a performing research environment. **The presentation of the synthesis gave the tone to the rest of the workshop and sparked positive debates about the relevance of the supply/demand analysis, the use of a ranking, and the position of academic knowledge in opposition to other types of knowledge.**

Session 3: Existing practices and approaches to assessing research excellence, the performance of higher education systems and research to policy links

Three existing practices were presented and discussed to serve as a source of inspiration for the rest of the activities. Gaétan de Rassenfosse (EPFL, Switzerland) showcased the processes underpinning the U21 Ranking of Higher Education Systems, a successful benchmarking tool comparing higher education systems. John Young (ODI, UK) shared several useful frameworks and visualization tools to best capture the social and policy context in which research takes place. Vicky Jones (HEFCE, UK) offered an insider view into the Research Excellence Framework (REF), one of the largest research assessment exercise in the world. **The session was extremely useful to integrate a number of new aspects, such as the design of a truly comparative benchmarking tool, factors affecting the research to policy nexus, and the measure of research quality.**

Session 4: Group work – Setting out the framework

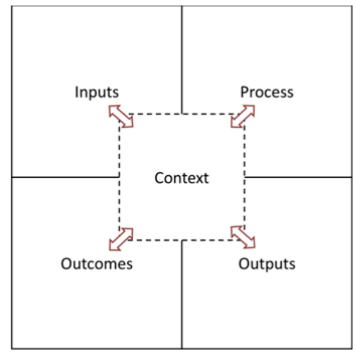
The participants split into groups to discuss three questions about the conceptual framework.

How to define a "performing" research environment?
A performing research environment was defined as one that gives the resources and skills to do useful "stuff". It should be meritocratic, transparent and professionalized. In this way, it should embody the values of rigorous, credible and robust research. This includes also

[2] The three reports can be downloaded from the GDN website. Indonesia: http://goo.gl/pNsb0p; Peru, Bolivia and Paraguay: http://goo.gl/GN1KJ8; and Cote d'Ivoire: http://goo.gl/Ofv4H3.

ethical values, research integrity and academic freedom. It should be equitable, show a certain amount of diversity, and be able to have some type of policy influence by feeding public debate with plurality and contestation. It should train human capital, by training researchers and analysts but also research users who need skills for a broad understanding of research. Finally, it should provide researchers with adequate funding and infrastructure.

What are the relevant dimensions of the research environment to scrutinize?
In defining the relevant dimensions to scrutinize, two possibilities were discussed: thematic-oriented dimensions, or process-oriented dimensions. The latter was chosen because of the complexity and the inter-related nature of the themes we were looking at. Choosing a process-oriented framework allows for identifying the factors of the research environment that enable or prevent the production, circulation and use of good quality research. Five relevant dimensions of the research environment were proposed: inputs, process, outputs, outcome and context.



What are the criteria that help measure or assess "performance" for each of these dimensions?
A prior discussion in the group focused on briefly understanding the two other questions. The research environment should be analyzed at the national level, potentially with a Production-Use-Value lens of analysis. The criteria should capture spillover effects from training human capital in research, but also what are the incentives (beyond money) that the environment's performance creates. It should find a way to measure rigor in non-academic research outputs. The criteria should capture the social usefulness of research in terms of transparency, accountability and policy dialogue. This usefulness should also be measured for stakeholders such as the media and NGOs.

Session 5: Data and statistics

The session included a presentation on the work done by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) by Silvia Montoya (UIS) and an overview of potentially available secondary data by Clément Gévaudan (GDN). **The main interest of the session was to discuss with a leading institution that develops comparable data about research, and to gage the various sources of data for our exercise.**

Session 6: Refining the framework

Three groups discussed the relevance of the proposed framework, its conceptual justification, and then started populating its dimensions. The framework itself reaches a consensus and groups strengthened the point that it should be contextualized, flexible, development focused (for capacity building and better social utility), participatory, humble, and boast a synergy and added value to existing efforts. It should not only qualify research environments but also encourage conversation by analyzing challenges and asking a set of questions. In this perspective, a ranking would not be the most adapted solution. Ultimately, the framework should aim at making research more useful for policy and improving people's life. It could take the form of a periodic (but not yearly) global report, with country case studies in-between, accompanied by an open online knowledge sharing platform, such as a database on research systems and policies. The data would be used to keep the interest alive with regular publications of analyzed data on the research environment. The idea is therefore related to building an observatory of research policies.

On **inputs**, this includes funding (for research, training, spaces, time), infrastructure (physical, libraries, ICT, etc.), human capital (but not only PhDs as a "model" researcher), the diversity of actors (types of organizations), and data (availability, quality, accessibility). On **process**, this includes policies and the incentive structure, mentoring (vertical and horizontal), peer review culture, research administration, leadership and management, networks and research communities (local and global), engagement, quality control and ethics. On **output**, this includes academic output (on SCOPUS), research-based policy outputs (policy notes, policy workshops) and human capital (number of graduates in the academia, balance across gender and other socio-economic groups)[3]. On **outcome**, this includes how research is streamlined into society (graduates outside the academia, presence of the research in media and advocacy, training of policymakers), and the use of research for policy design (process of measurable density of interaction between academia and policy circles), policy implementation (research-based monitoring), and policy evaluation. On **context**, this includes the cultural specificity, historical trajectories (establishing or breaking path-dependency) and political economy.

Session 7: Concepts and definition

Two groups attempted to clearly define the dimensions and concluded with this consensus:

- Context: Historical, cultural, political and economic conditions in which research takes place and is used.
- Inputs: People and resources needed to produce robust social science research.
- Process: The set of rules, ethical principles, activities and interactions producing and promoting research.
- Outputs: Tangible products of research including publications, communications and people trained in producing and using good research.
- Outcome: Policymakers, practitioners and the public actively support and use research-based evidence and knowledge in addressing societal problems.

Session 8: Wrapping-up the discussions & next steps

With a consensus reached on the definitions in Session 7, the session went straight to the next steps for the project. The Doing Research team will work on the preparation of two papers. One would present the conceptual framework and detail what it includes, giving only some insights into the measurement. Another one would detail the data and the methodology for measuring and assessing the research environment. A business case should also be developed to emphasize what is the interest and purpose of the tool.

[3] Note: the difference between academic output and research-based policy output is mainly on the format: the latter is a translation of the former.

II. ESSENTIAL POINTS

- **Keeping in mind that the final product must be flexible**

There are a number of aspects in which it is important to keep the tool open and flexible for the actors who will use it. Firstly, context is key to understand the environment for doing research, its trends and evolution. The inclusion of the context dimension should be done in a way that it truly reflects the local context and its influence. This would be easier to reflect with in-depth country assessments than in a benchmarking exercise. Secondly, research actors, NGOs and policy actors may all find an interest in the tool but a different one altogether. Allowing for an open use of the data is essential to ensure that the product is user-friendly for its targeted groups. The flexibility of the tool should not hamper its robustness and reliability.

- **Clarify the rationale and test it by discussing with potential users**

One of the most frequently asked question is “what are we trying to achieve?” Though the answer is known by the people who have worked on the project for the past two years, it seems difficult to get a clear understanding at first sight. The rationale and main selling points of the program’s vision need to be better developed, before being tested with a small group of potential users and make sure it is easy to understand.

- **Identify the needs, and then look for solutions**

At the stage when the workshop took place, a number of definitions were still to be clarified and the framework itself had not been fully devised. It was then difficult to jump the step and go into solutions for measurements and data-related issues. Those definitions and normative issues have now been cleared (for most of them). The program management team will look for ways to unpack and integrate them into a mixed method approach.

- **Focus on developing a robust assessment tool before thinking about marketing**

This notably makes a point for avoiding the discussion on the ranking at this stage. Though we are looking for an innovative method to document and measure research environments, there is no guarantee that this method will lead to a ranking. In addition, the comparison is often made with the Doing Business program, which had a very positive dissemination and impact. The reason for that is because it was answering to a clearly identified need, and had developed robust and interesting measures with a transparent methodology.

- **Our target users are broad and different groups of stakeholders**

The final product will be aimed at several target groups. Policy actors to support the implementation of more efficient and enabling research policies; research administrators, such as deans and rectors who can take decisions at the meso level; researchers themselves to document a number of challenges that apply to their research environments; and international donors and capacity building organizations to better tailor interventions and support. The information that will be lifted by the assessment tool should also be seized and discussed in the public space. NGOs and the media are therefore clear target users to relay this information.

III. QUESTIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

SCOPE

- **How to qualify academic identity, which can be shared by actors who are less inclined to publishing in peer-reviewed journals, such as think tanks or NGOs?**

The inclusion of some think tanks or some NGOs could pose a problem in terms of data collection. Even though the number of academic think tanks in a country can be estimated, capturing all the relevant data regarding inputs, process and outputs will certainly prove to be a challenge. While there is a consensus that social science research is not accurately assessed by output indicators such as bibliometrics, the approach centered on the research process will be useful to integrate other dimensions than the published outputs.

- **How to actually document the locally-driven processes, and not the influence of the foreign research environment?**

Research is a process that is carried out in interaction with several other stakeholders, some of them being located outside of the domestic research environment. This has a potential spillover effect on the way research is carried out locally and is a dimension that may be interesting to include in the assessment. In addition, it is essential to capture information on how the domestic research environment interacts with collaborators and networks at the regional and global levels.

PERIODICITY

- **How often should the assessment tool be released?**

Considering that the research environment is not expected to change dramatically in a year time, a global report on research environments in social sciences could be released periodically every three or four years. This would be complemented by detailed Doing Research assessments to analyze the trends and challenges that apply to a specific country's research environment. In addition, periodic data would be released and discussed every year, but not necessarily published in a global report. It could be instead the subject for an e-discussion, or debates at the GDN Annual Conference, for example.

NATURE OF THE ASSESSMENT TOOL

- **What is the tool's purpose and what does it need to achieve it?**

The purpose of Doing Research assessments is to document and to analyze research environments in social sciences at the national, regional and global levels, and to be able to compare those environments. The tool and its methodology will answer three objectives:

- to inform targeted stakeholders about the state of strategic aspects of the research environment in their country;
- to guide research reform and make capacity building efforts more efficient by pointing at the bottlenecks and structural challenges of the research environment;
- to promote social science research as a major condition for effective, locally-owned and sustainable development policies.

This means that the assessment tool, as a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures, will have to be the product of a simple, yet robust and scientifically sound methodology. Its triple objective to inform, guide and promote means it will have to satisfy at the same time the academic community, policy-makers and a more general audience. This should be achieved with in-depth analysis of the issues at hand, possible recommendations on the way forward, and a visually compelling dissemination tool. In addition, building partnerships will be necessary with governments, international organizations and civil society organizations, as well as other research institutions in developing and developed countries alike.

BENCHMARKING AND RANKING

- **Do we absolutely need to benchmark and rank the countries' research environments?**

No, we don't need to necessarily benchmark them and rank them. However, the idea of drawing comparative analysis is clearly part of the program since its inception. While this could be done purely with a qualitative analysis, the final tool is likely to include a data component although this would probably not be enough to propose a comprehensive benchmark. The data will support the qualitative analysis and help with the comparative aspects. From that point, a ranking may be computed as a powerful marketing trick, but it should not constitute a major point of focus for the analysis. The ranking can also help draw the attention of relevant decision makers and potentially steer some further action around the program.

OTHER INITIATIVES

- **Are there synergies with existing and related initiatives?**

There are a number of programs and organizations which are related to Doing Research, though none of them is fully engaged in the same direction as our program. In the near future and once the conceptual foundations have been fully established, the GDN program management team will seek to join forces with those actors in order to strengthen both sides in their mission and objectives. This includes the World Bank Global Indicators Group's work on monitoring regulations and policies in various sectors, UNESCO Institute for Statistics' efforts to harmonize and disaggregate data on higher education and research, as well as other programs such as U21's Ranking of Higher Education Systems, the European Commission's U-Multirank program, or various frameworks and organizations working on the links between research and policy.

The way forward

With the outline of the conceptual framework that emerged from the two-day discussions, a number of activities will follow in the coming months:

- The **framework's conceptual foundations** will be made more explicit in a separate note, potentially turned into a GDN working paper. This will help build the theory of change underlying the rationale and strategy of the assessment tool.
- The framework will be populated with clearly identified and measurable indicators, both quantitative and qualitative in nature This will imply additional work on measurement and further in-depth mapping of available data (including from related initiatives) and data to be collected in each country.
- A **concept note** will be prepared on the basis of the above, to support an upcoming fundraising effort for testing the assessment tool. The fundraising proposal will also include the business case for the program and the value added for different kinds of audiences.
- The **pilot synthesis** will also be refined, to integrate the workshop's conclusions and include more from the specific findings that arose from the case studies.

Workshop participants

No.	Name	Affiliation	Position
1	Alex Ademokun	DFID Evidence into Action Team	Research Specialist
2	Alban Ahouré	University FHB of Abidjan	Professor
3	Ramona Angelescu Naqvi	GDN	Director of Programs
4	Maria Balarin	GRADE	Senior Researcher
5	Benjamin Buclet	CREED	Director
6	Ian Carter	University of Sussex	Research and Enterprise Director
7	Clément Gévaudan	GDN	Senior Program Associate
8	Pierre Jacquet	GDN	President
9	Vicky Jones	Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)	Deputy Manager for the Research Excellence Framework
10	Jenny Lah	Independent Consultant	
11	Lynn V. Meek	LH Martin Institute	Founder
12	Martha Melesse	International Development Research Centre	Senior Program Specialist
13	Silvia Montoya	UNESCO Institute for Statistics	Director
14	Gaétan de Rassenfosse	Ecole polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne	Holder of the Chair of Innovation and IP Policy
15	Fajri Siregar	Centre for Innovation Policy and Governance, Indonesia Sustainability Centre	Executive Director
16	L. Alan Winters	University of Sussex GDN Board of Directors	Professor Chair
17	John Young	Overseas Development Institute	Programme Head

Workshop agenda

26 MAY 2016 – DAY ONE: FUNDAMENTALS

9:00 – 9:15	**Registration, welcome, coffee/tea**
9:15 – 9:45	**Opening remarks – the Doing Research program** - Pierre Jacquet, Ramona Angelescu Naqvi
9:45 – 11:15	**Session 1: Highlights from the pilot phase approaches** **Chair: Ian Carter** *Qualitative approaches (Peru/Paraguay/Bolivia, Niger)* - Maria Balarin *Quantitative approaches (Côte d'Ivoire/Cameroon)* - Alban Ahouré *Mixed methods (Indonesia, India/Bangladesh, Cambodia, South Africa)* - Fajri Siregar
11:15 – 11:30	Tea & coffee break
11:30 – 13:00	**Session 2: Synthesis of the Doing Research pilot phase** **Chair: Pierre Jacquet** *Synthesis of the pilot phase* - Benjamin Buclet
13:00 – 14:00	Lunch
14:00 – 15:30	**Session 3: Existing practices and methods** **Chair: Jenny Lah** *Learnings from the U21 Ranking of Higher Education Systems* - Gaétan de Rassenfosse *The context is key: tools and approaches for assessing the context and planning to maximize the uptake of research* - John Young *Assessing Research Excellence* - Vicky Jones
15:30 – 16:00	Tea & coffee break
16:00 – 17:00	**Session 4: Group work – Setting out the framework** ***How to define a "performing" research environment?*** Ramona Angelescu Naqvi, Maria Balarin, L. Alan Winters, John Young, Alex Ademokun ***What are the relevant dimensions of the research environment to scrutinize?*** Clément Gévaudan, Fajri Siregar, Benjamin Buclet, Vicky Jones, Jenny Lah, Ian Carter ***What are the criteria that help measure or assess "performance" for each of these dimensions?*** Pierre Jacquet, Alban Ahouré, Gaétan de Rassenfosse, Martha Melesse, Lynn V. Meek
17:00 – 17:30	**Group work summary** **Chair: Pierre Jacquet**
17:30 – 18:00	Wrap-up and outline of Day Two

27 MAY 2016 – DAY TWO: OPERATIONS

9:00 – 10:00	**Session 5: Data and statistics** **Chair: Lynn V. Meek** *Sources, scope and availability of existing data* - Silvia Montoya / Clément Gévaudan
10:00 – 12:00	**Session 6: Refining methods and approaches…** *3 teams will each be in charge of refining a specific approach to conducting research environment assessments: quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods.* • What are the methodological requirement, virtues and limitations of the given approach? • What data are needed and how can they best be collected? • What indicators can be devised?
12:00 – 13:00	**Group work summary** **Chair: Silvia Montoya**
13:00 – 14:00	Lunch
14:00 – 14:15	Introduction to afternoon group work
14:15 – 15:45	**Session 7: … to better combine them** *The 3 teams are asked to build on the previous discussion to recommend a robust framework, possibly mixing several of the approaches already discussed..*
15:45 – 16:15	Tea & coffee break
16:15 – 18:00	**Session 8: Wrapping up the discussions – what should the next steps be?** **Chair: L. Alan Winters**