



2019 GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT CONFERENCE

# Knowledge for Sustainable Development: the Research-Policy Nexus

Bonn, Germany | 23-25 October 2019



Federal Ministry  
for Economic Cooperation  
and Development



d.i.e

Deutsches Institut für  
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development  
Institute



UNITED NATIONS  
UNIVERSITY  
UNU-EHS  
Institute for Environment  
and Human Security

## Summary

**The Global Development Network (GDN), the German Development Institute (DIE), the German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) and the United Nations University-Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS) are jointly organizing GDN's 2019 Global Development Conference in Bonn on the general theme of Evidence Based Sustainable Development. Titled *Knowledge for Sustainable Development: The Research-Policy Nexus*, the Conference will be held in October 2019 under the auspices of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). German and international partners and supporters will be invited to contribute sessions and speakers. The Conference will also mark GDN's 20th Anniversary, echoing the Bonn 1999 World Bank Conference on *Bridging Research and Policy* where the Global Development Network was formally launched.**

## 1. Background

Development challenges, priorities and goals have changed substantially over the last 20 years. At the same time, the global development research landscape has also changed considerably. Research centers, think tanks, universities and development research networks have flourished in many developing countries and regionally; research technologies and dissemination methods have undergone dramatic changes; a necessary and welcome focus on results has moved the research agenda toward a shared focus on development impacts; and new thematic challenges have surfaced, notably related to the achievement of the globally agreed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and connecting the provision of Global Public Goods (GPG) with local development efforts and policies. 20 years after the launch of the Global Development Network, it is time to both take stock of these rich evolutions and to ask how to strengthen the capacity of the current system of development research to meet the new development challenges and facilitate sustainability. This is the purpose of the proposed 2019 Global Development Conference.

GDN's Global Development Conferences have been held every year since 1999 in different parts of the world: Bonn, Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro, New Delhi, Dakar, St. Petersburg, Beijing, Brisbane, Kuwait City, Prague, Bogota, Budapest, Manila, Accra, Casablanca and Lima. Themes are aligned with the global sustainable development agenda and debates.

### *Objectives*

These global development conferences host high level, truly inclusive evidence-based debates on current development challenges and priorities and, at the same time, provide promising researchers from around the world an opportunity to showcase their research in an international forum and benefit from interaction with world-renowned academics and policy-makers. The purpose is therefore dual: highlight innovative, high quality, original and topical research to facilitate science and policy interchanges; and provide a truly global voice on what are now very public debates on sustainable development challenges, with a clear input into shaping global policy debates on the impact and the policy responses to the drive for sustainability, while overcoming the knowledge for development crisis.

The conference also marks the culmination of the annual awards competition for outstanding research on development by young, promising researchers and for innovative development projects; the selection of winners and prize ceremony take place during the conference.

## **2. Target Audience**

GDN's conferences attract a diverse audience - researchers, policy-makers, representatives of international organizations, civil society, development practitioners and private sector. They are unique not just in the range and number of attendees (typically between 300-500 participants), but also in the array of issues discussed and regions represented. At previous conferences, participants represented no fewer than 100 countries, with the vast majority from developing and transition countries, which is the trademark of these global development conferences. Nobel prize laureates, high level policy makers and opinion leaders from around the world have attended the previous conferences. With its already well-established position as an international hub for knowledge and development and its state-of-the-art conference infrastructure, Bonn is uniquely placed to host this 19<sup>th</sup> GDN global development conference. We expect high level German and other European dignitaries, top academics and opinion leaders to contribute and shape the debate together with their counterparts from around the world.

## **3. Thematic Content**

To achieve this overarching objective, the Conference will focus on four major (inter-related) themes.

### **3.1. Analytical Underpinnings of Sustainable Development**

It is first necessary to take stock of what has been achieved so far and identify shortfalls, particularly given the global nature of the SDGs. There are two inter-related sets of questions:

***How – and how much - has our understanding of “development” improved over the last two decades? What are the persistent challenges?***

*What has been learnt from development economics, evaluations and other disciplines and approaches on development processes and dynamics? How has academic research interacted with other forms of non-academic knowledge on development?*

Development challenges are multidisciplinary and involve ethical, behavioral and collective dimensions that call on sociology, anthropology, psychology and political science as well as on economics. *How can the insights of various disciplines be brought together through a research process that meets high quality standards?* Development challenges also naturally involve transformative knowledge from natural and “hard” sciences, and conversely, knowledge from “hard sciences” is hardly enough by itself to lead to action, as the experience with climate change mitigation and even adaptation shows. *How can social sciences be better mobilized together with hard sciences to promote effective policies? How can evaluations be better designed and used as instruments of applied science to inform development policies, budgeting and programming?*

Finally, there are many sources of evidence beyond academic research on development: statistics, big data, voting patterns, cultural beliefs knowledge from experience, all forms of tacit, non-formalized knowledge. Research, notably evaluative research, has a role to play to formalize tacit knowledge and knowledge from experience. *How does academic research interact with these other forms of non-academic knowledge? How does it, and can it build on them?*

***How much has development research contributed to better development policies? What drives the supply of, and demand for, development research? How does that differ between developing and developed countries?***

*Are we closer to a better use of evidence in policy-making? Can such impact be conceptualized, studied, monitored and measured?*

Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a mis-match between the demand and supply of policy-oriented research feeding into policy decisions. Policy advice produced by researchers is very often unsolicited, except perhaps for evaluations of government programs, while the policy-makers’ demand for immediate knowledge inputs is often not satisfied by academic researchers. A standard approach has been to build the capacity of academics to communicate their research more proactively and to facilitate that connection through various tools and events. But this has still fallen short. *What are the instruments, practices, processes that could specifically address the gap between the supply of academic research and the demand for development knowledge? Who have been the most successful and innovative actors to facilitate that intermediation and how can they be supported? How is that changing in the current digital era?*

### **3.2. Joint Challenges in Global Development**

***What are the substantial and operational knowledge gaps that may hamper the pursuit of the SDGs? Which are the shared development challenges of developing and developed countries (i.e. climate change and adaptation; migration; inequality; health etc.)?***

The pursuit of the SDGs and the prevalence of new global challenges will require a lot of new data and analytical and contextual research, cutting across disciplinary boundaries and countries. The discussion might focus on three types of potential knowledge gaps. The first is thematic: climate change, environmental protection, resilience, the implications of the digital economy, or the

various dimensions of migration, among other themes, need to be better documented and understood. But the “older” issues of poverty, inequality, democracy, education, the organization of health systems, the role of institutions, still deserve further investigation, especially in their local contexts. *How should the priority themes for development research be established and by whom?*

Second, most of the efforts at knowledge generation or transfer seem to focus on the “what should be done?” Yet the pursuit of the SDGs heavily relies on the quality of implementation and the learning therein, which relates to the “how it should be done” question. *How can development research promote a better understanding of the determinants of action and the political economy of implementation?*

Finally, SDG-related challenges, including poverty, inequality, governance, democracy and citizen participation, climate change, security, sustainable growth, digital transformations etc., are salient issues in “developed” as well as “developing” countries. Some issues around global governance, international cooperation etc. which are now reflected in the SDGs benefit from less research available to guide and inform the international development community. *How can development research become truly “universal” in its generation and relevance, addressing challenges that are often shared by all countries and structuring a mutual learning process through more comparative work? What role for global networks?*

### **3.3. Next frontier challenge: Big Data, AI, digital transformation**

The advances in IT, digitalization, Big Data, and AI have impacted labor markets, access to the poor, service delivery, and democratic processes, thereby changing the development paradigm. They have also started to have a considerable impact on development research and policy implementation. The possibility to cheaply collect and process huge amounts of individual data opens new areas of investigation. Beyond the technical facility of collecting and interpreting data, these technological developments may increase the ability to conduct experiments. Observation and experimentation, two important legs of social sciences, can be expected to flourish. New technologies also have the potential to lower barriers to entry by facilitating access to (digital) higher education, networking, international research collaboration, knowledge co-creation, and a much more effective treatment of complexity. They may also facilitate a real-time feedback loop from innovation to evaluative research to policy adjustment likely to provide more timely policy responses.

However, those with poor access to digital equipment and digital knowledge risk being excluded. Furthermore, the advent of a seamless information society is not likely to eliminate power plays, ethical concerns and inequalities. *How best to reap the benefits of this new revolution for development, and make both the production and utilization of scientific knowledge more easily accessible to all, while maintain confidentiality and respect for human subjects?*

Technological facilities do not solve basic issues that remain at the core of research rigor and therefore quality: among others, the nature and quality of data collected, interpreting them with rigor, using them to address structured questions rather than to identify the questions to be addressed, and trying to identify robust ways to address existing problems, rather than define the problems for one’s own pet solutions. *How to address the risk that the collection and use of data would lead to a data-supply-driven focus on selected issues that may not address the most urgent development challenges? How to mobilize social science research as a coherent way to guide the demand for data and ensure rigorous treatment and use?*

### 3.4. Development Policy & Finance Implications

As for all areas of development finance, an objective of aid to local research should be to avoid making domestic institutions dependent on foreign support and to enhance the sustainability of the local research systems, which ultimately depends on domestic funding. *How to promote this transition through development assistance?*

The 2006 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness emphasized ownership as one of the principles. Putting the developing countries in the driver seat through capacity building was the logical operational implication. Research capacity building in developing countries can also foster stronger local democracies, enhancing local civic debates and appreciation for science and research to counter the spread of ‘fake news’.

However, the focus on academic output quality has mostly taken precedence. Research funding tends to go to the best scholars so that it can be shown to have a high quality scientific impact. *Should and could research capacity building be considered as a specific objective, distinct from the generation of scientific output and funded for its own merits? What could then be the appropriate metric for monitoring results and quality?* The goal of research capacity building also goes beyond promoting the local *supply* of good research: low capacity in the South is perpetuated by the lack of demand for knowledge produced from endogenous sources. *How can development assistance contribute to promoting such demand and strengthening local knowledge systems and infrastructure? Finally, what is the role of the private sector in supporting research and knowledge sharing that enables faster progress towards the SDGs, both in terms of know-how and financing?*

## 4. Structure & Organization

- **Duration & Timing:** 2 and a half days (October 23-25, 2019)
- **Sessions**
  - Each of the 4 sub-themes briefly described above will be addressed in a *90mn plenary session*. The role of plenary sessions will be to debate issues broadly and in an interactive and lively, “Davos-type” discussion.
  - 15-to-20 parallel sessions will analyze sub-thematic issues more in-depth. Some may be directly organized by the conference partners or other organizations on invitation, others will be selected through a global Call for Sessions. Some of them will feature papers selected through an open Call for Papers.
    - The finalists of the Awards competition will also present in parallel sessions during the conference.
  - Keynote addresses and shorter two-person debates (“controversies”).
  - Poster displays and Q&As
- **Organization**
  - A high-level *Conference Scientific Committee* will recommend and validate plenary session speakers and monitor the quality of the overall program, the choice of parallel sessions, and the selection of papers.

- A *global call for papers* will be organized around the 4 sub-themes identified above. When feasible, one of the sessions in each parallel-session slot would be organized around selected papers from the call. Depending on quality, 20 to 25 papers will be selected by the Conference Scientific Committee for presentation at the Conference.
- As in previous Global Development Conferences, a *Call for Sessions* will also be run to allow many other interested organizations to feature relevant work at the conference.
- International research institutes and networks such as Future Earth, IDRC, ODI, ISD, Center for Global Development, Results for Development, Southern Voices, the Network of Southern Think Tanks (NeST), JICA-RI, UNFCCC, 3ie, the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data (GPSDD), EADN, EADI and others will be invited to contribute papers, speakers, sessions, dedicated exhibits and/or side events.
- *Keynotes* will be preferably based on papers specifically written for the Conference by the keynote speakers.
- There will be a *Youth Essay Competition*, open to all post-graduate students and young researchers across the world (echoing the debate on the universal nature of development research). The theme might be “What are the next frontiers for development research and how do you plan to contribute?”. The objective would be to select a gender- and geographically balanced group of up to 50 young researchers below 30 and invite them to the Conference. A specific half-day pre-Conference event will be organized for them – and they will be invited to participate actively in the Conference sessions and poster presentations.

- **Tentative Conference Agenda**

	<b>Day I</b>	<b>Day II</b>	<b>Day III</b>
9:00-9:30	Opening and Keynote address	Controversy 1	Keynote
9:30-11:00	Plenary A	Plenary C	Controversy 2
11:00-11:30	Tea/Coffee Break	Tea/Coffee Break	Tea/Coffee Break
11:30-13:00	Parallel sessions 1, 2, 3, 4	Parallel sessions 9, 10, 11, 12	Closing Plenary & Awards Ceremony
13:00-14:30	Lunch & Poster Exhibition	Lunch & Poster Exhibition	
14:30-16:00	Parallel sessions 5, 6, 7, 8	Parallel sessions 13, 14, 15, 16	
16:00-16:30	Tea/Coffee Break	Tea/Coffee Break	
16:30-18:00	Plenary B	Plenary D	
18:30-20:00	<i>Cocktail/Special event (if sponsored)</i>		