Evaluation of the Global Development Network's Programmes in Francophone Africa (2021-2025)

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Acronyms

AFD	Agence Française de Développement
DRA	Doing Research Assessments
DRAF	Doing Research Assessment Framework
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
IT	Information Technology
IRCB	Institutional Research Capacity Building
GDN	Global Development Network
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
KII	Key Informant Interview
MSC	Most Significant Change
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD/DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development/ Development Assistance Committee
ODA	Official Development Assistance
PeA	Academia Partnerships Africa–France
RCS	Research Capacity Strengthening
SGD	Small Group Discussion

Executive Summary

This evaluation assesses the Global Development Network's (GDN) portfolio of research capacity strengthening initiatives in Francophone Africa from 2021 to 2025. Covering five complementary programmes, the evaluation examines the extent to which GDN has strengthened research capacity at individual, institutional, and system levels, while contributing to more resilient and locally grounded research ecosystems.

The evaluation finds that GDN's integrated, multi-level approach to research capacity strengthening is both relevant and effective in addressing long-standing structural constraints in Francophone African research systems. By combining support to individuals, institutions, and the broader ecosystem, the programme has generated mutually reinforcing outcomes that would be unlikely through isolated interventions.

Key Results

Strengthened individual research capacity and professionalisation: GDN's programmes significantly enhanced the skills, confidence, and autonomy of early-career researchers. Participants developed integrated research competencies across the full research cycle, supported by hands-on mentoring and applied learning. Beyond technical skills, the programme strengthened critical professional capacities, including grant management, project delivery, and research communication, enabling researchers to function as independent project leaders.

Mentorship as a central driver of change: Mentorship emerged as a defining feature of the programme, accelerating learning and supporting the transition from dependent to autonomous research practice. While generally effective, variations in mentor matching, modality, and support highlight the need for more structured guidance to ensure consistency across contexts.

Increased research productivity and emerging career outcomes: The programme contributed to increased research outputs, including publications, conference participation, and dissemination to policy actors. While many outputs remain in progress due to long research cycles, there is strong evidence of improved productivity, research quality, and readiness for future outputs. Early signs of career progression and professional recognition are evident, though full impacts are time-lagged.

Institutional transformation toward more structured and credible research systems: At the institutional level, GDN support catalysed a shift from informal, fragmented research practices to more formalised governance, administrative, and financial systems. Participating institutions established research laboratories, strengthened financial management, and adopted structured planning and reporting processes. These changes enhanced institutional credibility, enabling access to new funding opportunities and partnerships.

Stronger research culture and external engagement: Institutions became more collaborative, outward-facing, and engaged in policy and public debates. Research

activities increasingly moved beyond academic outputs to include stakeholder engagement, communication, and influence on national discussions.

Improved fundability and strategic positioning of institutions: The programme strengthened institutions' ability to define and pursue autonomous, locally grounded research agendas. This resulted in increased success in securing external funding, improved proposal development capacities, and stronger positioning within national and regional research ecosystems.

System-level contributions remain emerging but promising: While structural constraints persist, the programme contributed to early shifts in research ecosystems, including improved collaboration, increased visibility of Francophone African research, and greater engagement with policy processes. Spillover effects, such as peer learning and informal knowledge diffusion, were evident but uneven and dependent on institutional contexts.

Key Challenges

Variability in mentorship quality and consistency: While mentorship was a central strength of the programme, its quality and effectiveness varied across contexts. Differences in disciplinary alignment, level of engagement, and virtual delivery modalities affected the consistency of support provided to researchers, highlighting the need for more structured matching and clearer guidance.

Gaps in advanced methodological and analytical support: Although the programme successfully strengthened foundational research skills, some participants reported limited support in advanced areas, particularly in data analysis and publication processes. This created gaps in later stages of the research cycle, especially for those seeking deeper methodological specialization.

Sustainability risks in institutional capacity gains: Institutional strengthening efforts led to significant improvements in governance, administration, and research support systems; however, several of these functions remain dependent on project-based funding. Without integration into core institutional budgets, there is a risk that these gains may not be sustained over time.

Persistent structural constraints in national research systems: Broader systemic challenges continue to shape programme outcomes, including limited domestic funding for research, fragmented governance structures, and constrained career pathways. These structural barriers limit the extent to which individual and institutional gains can translate into long-term, system-wide transformation.

Lessons Learned

Integrated, multi-level approaches are critical for sustainable capacity strengthening: The evaluation shows that combining interventions at individual, institutional, and system levels generates reinforcing effects that are unlikely to emerge through isolated support. Addressing multiple layers of the research ecosystem simultaneously strengthens both immediate outcomes and longer-term sustainability.

Mentorship and applied learning are key to translating skills into practice: Hands-on mentorship and learning-by-doing approaches were central to building not only skills but also autonomy and professional identity. Capacity strengthening was most effective when researchers applied new competencies directly within real research projects, supported by iterative feedback.

Institutional strengthening is essential to sustain individual-level gains: Individual capacity gains are more likely to endure and scale when embedded within institutions that have strong governance, administrative systems, and supportive research cultures. Without institutional anchoring, individual skills risk remaining isolated and difficult to sustain.

Flexible, demand-driven funding enhances relevance and ownership: Allowing institutions and researchers to define their own priorities enabled more contextually grounded and strategically aligned research agendas. This flexibility supported ownership, relevance, and stronger engagement with local policy and development challenges.

Informal networks and peer learning play a significant but uneven role: Knowledge diffusion and collaboration often occurred through informal peer networks rather than structured mechanisms. While these pathways are effective in constrained environments, their reach and sustainability depend heavily on individual initiative and institutional context.

Time horizons for research capacity outcomes must be realistic: Research capacity strengthening generates results over extended timeframes, particularly in relation to publications, career progression, and system-level change. Short-term assessments may underestimate impact, underscoring the importance of tracking longer-term outcomes and trajectories.

1. Introduction

The Global Development Network (GDN) has been implementing a set of regional research capacity-strengthening initiatives in Francophone Africa since 2021. Rather than a single program, this effort brings together several complementary initiatives that were launched around the same time through different funding streams. Collectively, these initiatives build on GDN's decade-long work to refine approaches to research capacity strengthening, with a focus on ensuring that internationally funded interventions are demand-driven and aligned with the realities of national and regional research ecosystems. Across these initiatives, GDN has deployed a range of capacity-strengthening methodologies, including research grants, mentorship, training, and institutional support. To date, GDN's work in Francophone Africa encompasses five major initiatives:

1. **Doing Research Assessments (DRA):** Mobilising local research teams in five countries to produce contextual analyses and comparative data on research ecosystems. Detailed initiative context can be found in Annex 1.

2. **Institutional Research Capacity Building (IRCB - Volet 1):** Supporting five universities and research institutions to implement self-defined capacity-strengthening strategies. The programme provided demand-led grants to strengthen institutional areas identified by the organisations themselves as critical to advancing their research capacity. Grants ranged from EUR 50,000 to 100,000 over an 18–24 month period. Detailed initiative context can be found in Annex 2.

3. **Regional Grant Scheme for Young Researchers (IRCB - Volet 2):** Providing early-career researchers with funding (EUR 10,000), mentoring, and training to help launch sustainable research careers. Detailed initiative context can be found in Annex 3.

4. **Think Tank Strengthening in the Sahel:** Supporting seven think tanks with grants, evidence fairs, and mentoring to increase their influence on public and policy debates. Detailed initiative context can be found in Annex 4.

5. **Training in Research Communication:** Addressing gaps in outreach through targeted training and the use of the GlobalDev Blog, a dissemination platform that strives to bridge the gap between development research and policy debates.

1.1 Purpose and Scope of Evaluation

Purpose

The purpose of this external evaluation is to provide an independent, evidence-based, assessment of GDN's programmes in Francophone Africa over the period 2021–2026. The evaluation examines successes, challenges, and lessons learned, as well as assesses the extent to which the initiatives have strengthened research capacity at individual, institutional, and systemic levels. In addition, the evaluation considers the extent to which supported research has informed national and regional development debates and identifies opportunities to strengthen, adapt, and scale future programming.

Specifically, the evaluation will:

- Assess the relevance, effectiveness, sustainability, and emerging impacts of GDN's work across the five initiatives.
- Analyse how the programme has contributed to strengthening research capacity and research ecosystems in Francophone Africa.
- Identify key contextual, institutional, and operational factors that have enabled or constrained results.
- Provide actionable recommendations to inform GDN's future programming and scale-up strategy in the region.

The evaluation serves both learning and accountability purposes by providing GDN, partners, and funders with practical insights into what has worked, what challenges remain, and where adjustments are needed in order to strengthen and sustain results.

Scope

The evaluation covers the programme period from 2021 to 2025 and includes five core initiatives:

- DRA in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, and Mali.
- IRCB in Senegal, Benin, Ivory Coast, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.
- Regional Grant Scheme for Young Researchers across Francophone Africa.
- Ideas for the Future: Supporting Sahelian Think Tanks to Enrich Public Debates (Savoirs Sahel 2).
- Training in Research Communication through GlobalDev

2. Context: GDN in Francophone Africa

2.1 GDN's Strategic Positioning

GDN was established in the late 1990s in response to a shared recognition among development donors that locally rooted research capacity is essential to development, particularly in the social sciences. From its inception, GDN positioned research capacity not simply as a technical input to development, but as a form of development in itself: grounded in locally generated ideas, evidence, and debate.

Over time, shifts in the global development finance landscape have challenged this original model. The decline of multilateralism, the end of core funding to intermediary organizations, and the growing donor emphasis on narrowly defined notions of impact and on evidence-based policymaking reshaped both funding flows and expectations. These trends increasingly favoured direct funding to individual researchers or institutions, often privileging short-term outputs over longer-term system strengthening.

In response, GDN undertook a strategic reorientation between 2014 and 2021. Moving away from an approach centred primarily on individual grants or single research projects, GDN began to experiment with funding modalities that target institutions, research systems, and the conditions under which research is produced, governed, and used. This shift reflected an internal recognition that research capacity cannot be sustainably strengthened one researcher, or one grant, at a time, and that international funding plays a limited (but potentially catalytic) role when aligned with locally defined priorities and institutional trajectories.

2.2 Overview of the Francophone Africa Portfolio

The Francophone Africa programme represents a comprehensive deployment of GDN's revised capacity-strengthening model to date. Beginning in 2020–2021, GDN brought together multiple funding and support instruments within a single regional portfolio. This portfolio has been supported primarily through two grants from the Agence Française de Développement (AFD): a multi-year grant of EUR 6 million from the French Ministry of Finance, administered under the umbrella of the Pôle clermontois de développement international (PCDI) and the Savoirs Sahel grant (EUR 980,000). This configuration provided a unique opportunity to test whether interventions at individual, institutional, and system levels could reinforce one another when implemented in parallel in the same region.

As mentioned earlier, the portfolio brings together five core initiatives: DRA, institutional research capacity building with universities and think tanks, a regional grant scheme for young researchers, targeted support for research communication through the GlobalDev Blog, and regionally oriented convening and learning activities. This integrated regional approach reflects a strategic hypothesis at the heart of the programme: that combining tools across levels and actors can generate complementarities, learning effects, and economies of effort that are unlikely to emerge solely from isolated interventions. Testing this hypothesis is a central concern of the present evaluation.

2.3 Regional Landscape for Research Systems

The Francophone Africa portfolio is situated within a regional research landscape characterised by persistent structural constraints. Across countries, research systems face chronic underfunding, limited domestic investment, and heavy dependence on external financing[12]. Governance arrangements for research are often fragmented across ministries and agencies, with weak coordination between universities, research institutes, think tanks, and policymakers[3]. Career pathways for researchers remain constrained, shaped by hierarchical institutional cultures, limited opportunities to lead independent research, and weak incentives for policy engagement or public communication[4].

At the system level, data on the functioning of research ecosystems has historically been sparse, particularly in the social sciences. This lack of data has limited the ability of national actors and donors alike to diagnose bottlenecks, identify leverage points, or assess the effectiveness of different funding approaches. In this context, GDN's Doing Research initiative seeks to address a foundational gap, by producing comparative and country-led analyses of how research systems operate. In addition, by reintroducing research governance, quality, and societal relevance into national policy debates.

These structural conditions shape both the opportunities and the limits of international support. They also underscore the rationale for GDN's ecosystem-oriented approach in Francophone Africa, which aims not only to fund research activities, but to engage with the institutional and systemic environments that determine whether research capacity can be sustained and used over time.

[1] Beaudry, C., Mouton, J, & Prozesky, H. (2018). The next generation of Scientists. Link.
[2] Goudiaby, J.A., Zanfini, L., & Arvanitis, R. (2025) V/La renaissance de la recherche en Afrique: de la dépendance à l'intégration internationale. Link.
[3] Gaillard, J., and Roland Waast (1988). La recherche scientifique en Afrique. Link.
[4] Nanfosso, R. T. (2011) L'état du renforcement des capacités en Afrique. Link.

3. Evaluation Framework

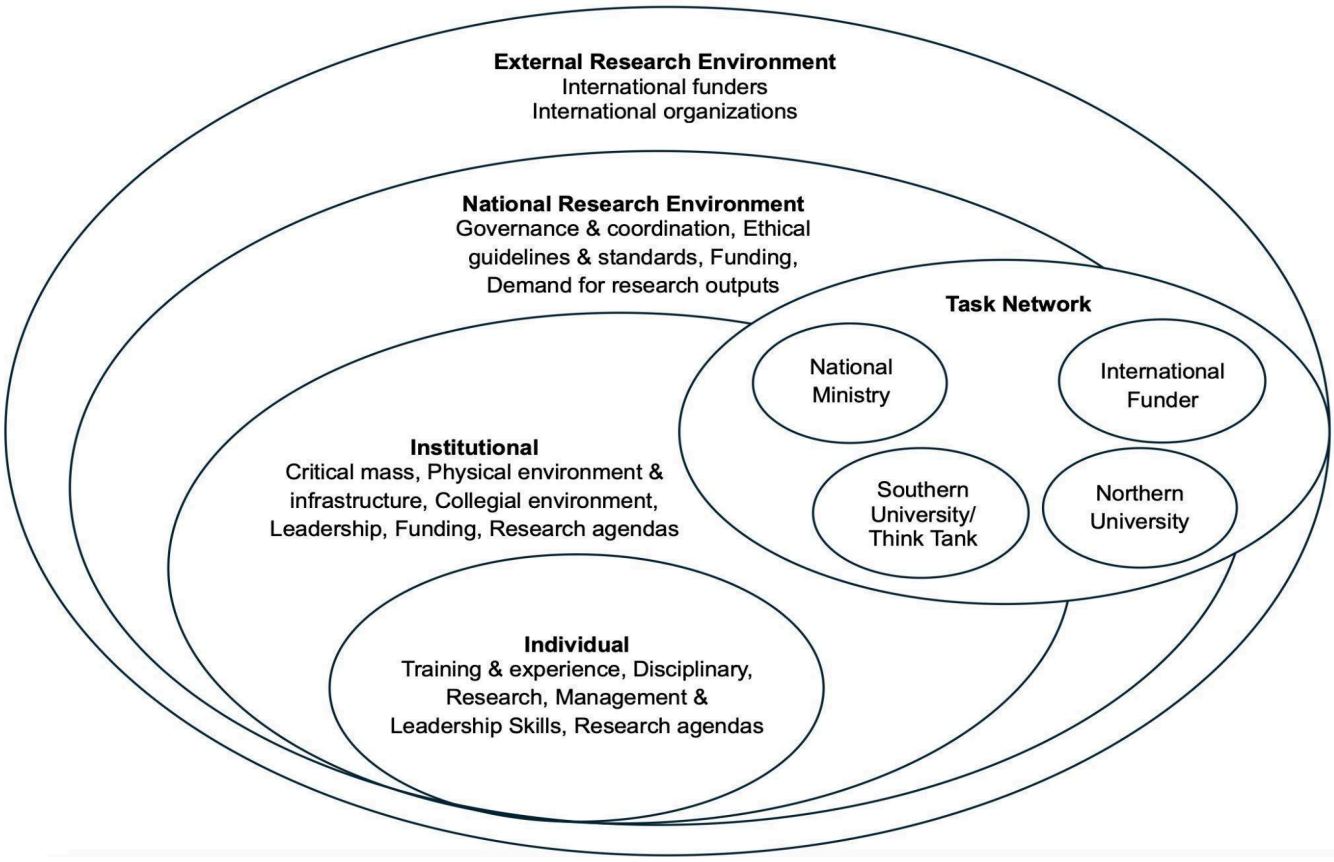
The evaluation is structured around the OECD/DAC evaluation criteria to ensure rigor, relevance, and alignment with international best practices. This approach enables us to provide evidence-based insights on how the initiatives have strengthened research capacity at individual, institutional, and systemic levels, and to identify lessons to inform GDN's future strategy and scale-up efforts.

3.1 Overarching Approach and Analytical Framework

Evaluating GDN's Intervention from a Systems Perspective

This report assesses how GDN's initiatives create sustainable improvements in research production, use, collaboration, and governance across multiple layers of the research ecosystem. Research capacity strengthening (RCS) initiatives operate across four mutually reinforcing levels, to uncover the outcomes and synergies generated by a programme across said ecosystem. This includes whether vertical inputs at one level generate changes at the other levels, or whether horizontal inputs across more than one level in a country generate stronger evidence of change.

Figure 1: RCS Conceptual Framework



GDN's programme was evaluated for change at each level, as well as to identify synergies and interactions across levels: a key dimension of systems strengthening, as described below.

a. Individual Level: Skills, Competencies, and Research Practice

Evaluation at this level examined the:

- Acquisition of technical and methodological skills;
- Ability to conceptualise, design, and conduct high-quality research and research agendas;
- Improvements in writing, publishing, grant management, and communication;
- Growth in confidence, autonomy, and professional networks; and
- Whether participation resulted in career advancement or leadership opportunities.

b. Institutional Level: Governance, Systems, and Culture

The evaluation assessed how GDN-supported organisations strengthened their internal systems and whether these institutional changes enhanced research productivity and quality. This includes:

- Strengthening of managerial, administrative, and financial systems;
- Improved research infrastructure (ethics boards, resources);
- Changes in organisational culture around research, collaboration, and learning;
- Ability to mobilise additional funding or partnerships; and
- Ability to develop, implement, and sustain research agendas.

c. National Systems/Research Environment Level

The evaluation examined whether the initiative influenced the broader ecosystem in which research occurs, including:

- Changes to national policy frameworks and governing research;
- National funding mechanisms and domestic investment in research and development;
- Collaboration networks among universities, think tanks, and government; and
- Uptake of research in decision-making processes.

d. External Research Environment/Global Partnerships

Given GDN's global footprint, the evaluation also explored:

- Alignment with global research capacity strengthening agendas (e.g., equitable North–South partnerships);
- Increased access to international networks, funding streams and collaborations; and
- Contribution to reshaping global norms around equity, localisation and research leadership, in the context of funding research for development.

4. Evaluation Questions

The evaluation questions provide the analytical framework to guide the assessment of GDN's Francophone Africa portfolio. They were designed to examine both the performance of individual initiatives and the added value of combining multiple interventions within a single regional strategy. Key evaluation questions include:

a. Individual Level: Skills, Competencies, and Research Practice

- Did GDN's inputs create measurable improvements in researcher capacity?
- Are these skills being used, sustained, and diffused to others (e.g., peer mentoring)?
- Did individual-level strengthening translate into improved research outputs?

b. Institutional Level: Governance, Systems, and Culture

- Did institutional processes become more efficient, transparent, or supportive of research?
- Are institutions better positioned to attract or sustain research funding?
- Did individual-level capacity translate into institutional performance improvements?

c. National Systems/Research Environment Level

- Did the initiative influence the "rules of the game" for research?
- Did the initiative strengthen national research coordination, incentives and policy linkages?

d. External Research Environment/Global Partnerships

- Did GDN's initiative improve Francophone Africa's visibility and influence in global research?
- Did the initiative contribute to more equitable and coherent global funding ecosystems?

5. Methodology

The evaluation adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative tools to generate evidence-based findings. This approach ensures triangulation of data across sources and methods, while capturing both measurable outcomes and the lived experiences of stakeholders. The methodology is participatory, and is designed to engage GDN staff, grantees, partners, and donors in the process of reflection and learning.

5.1 Methods

Document Review: A systematic desk review was conducted of programme documents across all five initiatives, including assessments from DRA, institutional capacity-building plans, think tank reports, grantee outputs, mentoring and training materials, mentoring reports, and GlobalDev products. Using a thematic coding matrix, the review synthesized evidence on outputs, outcomes, and underlying assumptions.

Key Informant Interviews (KII): The team conducted 55 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, including GDN staff, grantees, mentors, institutional partners, think tank directors, policymakers, and donors. Interviews were tailored to each initiative's logic and outcome areas, and were conducted in both French and English.

Small Group Discussions (SGDs) using Most Significant Change (MSC): The team facilitated 18 virtual and in-person SGDs, grouped by stakeholder and programme type (e.g., early-career researchers, think tank beneficiaries, and institutional learning leads). Discussions explored shared experiences, mentorship models, and perceived influence on research practices or policy environments. Participatory tools were used to encourage inclusive contributions and reflection. During the SGDs, participants were invited to share personal stories that reflect the most meaningful changes they experienced through their involvement in the programme. These narratives helped support a deeper understanding of how and why change occurred, complementing the broader analysis of outcomes at individual, institutional, and systemic levels.

Surveys: To complement qualitative methods, an online survey was administered to participants of the young researchers grant scheme, of which 30 people responded. The survey captured standardized data on outcomes, perceptions of programme value, and areas for improvement: allowing for comparative analysis across initiatives and geographies.

Table 1. Evaluation Sample - Methods

Programme Stakeholder	Number of KIIs	Number of SGDs	Surveys	Total Stakeholders
GDN/Donor	8	N/A	N/A	8
DRA	5	10	N/A	15
Savoirs Sahel 2	12	N/A	N/A	12
IRCB: Volet 1	5	8	N/A	13
IRCB: Volet 2	24	N/A	30	54
Global Dev	1	N/A	N/A	1
Total				**103**

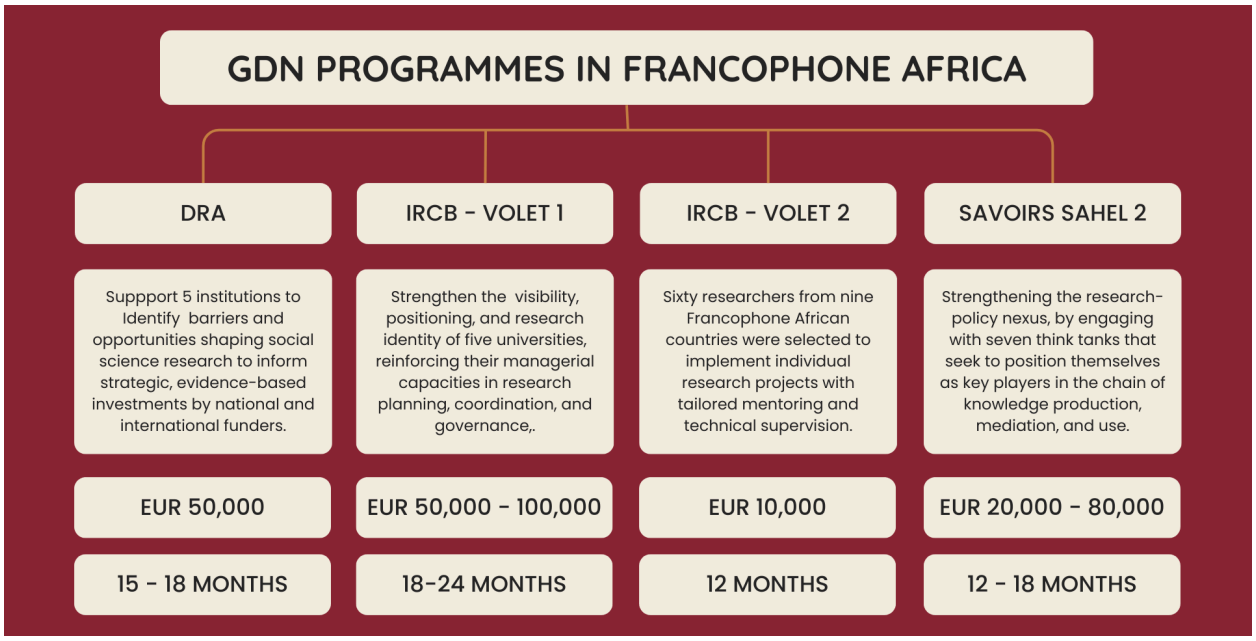
Table 2. Evaluation Sample - Stakeholder type

Program	GDN Staff	Mentors	Grantees	Donor	Total Stakeholders
Savoirs Sahel 2	1	2	8	2	13
DRA	2	3	12	2	19
IRCB: Volet 1	1	4	9	1	14
IRCB: Volet 2		3	51		55
Global Dev	1	0	0	1	2
Total					**103**

6. Findings

To situate the findings within the different programs, the table below outlines at a high-level the objectives of each program, the grant amount, and the funding period.

Figure 2: Summary of GDN Programmes in Francophone Africa



6.1 Individual Level Findings

This section assesses individual-level research capacity strengthening, focusing on whether GDN-supported interventions led to measurable and sustained improvements in researchers' skills, autonomy, and productivity. The analysis examines changes in technical and methodological competence, research practice, confidence and professional identity, and early career outcomes, by drawing upon interviews across participants and mentors.

Evaluation Question:
Did GDN's inputs create measurable improvements in researcher capacity?

Finding 1: Individual-level research capacity strengthening integrated research competence, not just isolated skills.

Collectively, individual-level research capacity strengthening outcomes extended beyond skills acquisition to the systematic strengthening of research practice as a professional competence. GDN's programmes did not simply increase the number of skills held by

early-career researchers, but altered how those skills were combined and applied across the full research cycle. Interviewees described acquiring methodological, analytical, writing, and grant and project management capacities, throughout the entirety of their applied research (rather than stand-alone training events). Participants highlighted that mentoring and technical support spanned all stages of research production: from conceptualisation and design, to data collection, analysis, and publication. As one young researcher explained, “my way of working has evolved. I’ve become more analytical, more demanding in formulating hypotheses, and more strategic in how I present results. I can now produce international-level scientific articles more quickly, conduct deeper mobility analyses, and anticipate theoretical debates before writing.”

Participants stressed that these capacities were not routinely taught within their own institutional environments. As one noted, “the mentoring and technical support were invaluable. This is not a mechanism covered by my university system.” Survey results reinforce these perceptions: all respondents reported that the fellowship met their research needs and career goals well or very well, and 97% reported substantial improvement in their ability to conduct high-quality research. Instead, GDN’s programmes supported what can be characterised as integrated research competence: the ability to formulate research questions, select and apply appropriate methods, manage timelines and resources, and translate findings into credible outputs. This matters because integrated competence underpins researcher autonomy, credibility, and sustained engagement in research.

Interviewees repeatedly framed the programme as a turning point in their professional trajectories, describing a clear “before and after” in how they approached research work. One early-career researcher reflected, “I had difficulty getting guidance, since supervisors can be overwhelmed with many responsibilities [...] but through GDN, the host institution responded quickly when I needed support. The mentor guided me, helping with research structure, setting objectives, choosing the right methodology, defining variables, and correcting drafts.” Another grantee similarly emphasised the end-to-end nature of support: “From developing the research question, through the methodology and data collection and analysis, to finalizing the article, I really benefited from [the technical] advice.” For some, the programme enabled methodological expansion beyond prior academic training, especially through applied and field-based research approaches. As one respondent stated, “I usually work on macroeconomics, so field-based microeconomic research was new to me. I learned new methodologies, techniques for field data collection and analysis, and gained experience in managing research activities.”

Across interviews, grantees identified weak methodological foundations as their primary constraint prior to their participation in the GDN programme, particularly in contexts characterised by limited supervision, scarce funding for fieldwork, and minimal exposure to advanced analytical approaches. As one grantee summarised, “the programme filled three gaps: methodological, financial, and professional guidance.” Methodological

learning in particular was embedded in the production of concrete research outputs, rather than delivered as abstract training. Several grantees described this applied process as transformative, particularly during writing and revision stages: “It was when I wrote the article with my mentor’s guidance that I felt a change in my scientific research skills.” Mentors corroborated these trajectories, observing visible and cumulative improvement over time. One mentor noted that the grantee “made significant progress, especially on the methodological side. He improved his analytical skills and used appropriate tools and software for his research.” These accounts indicate that methodological capacity was strengthened through iterative application and feedback, increasing the likelihood that skills would be retained and reused beyond the granteeship period.

Researchers also reported concrete gains in methodological rigour aligned with international standards: “The biggest challenge for me was methodology. I really wanted to strengthen the foundations of my research approach, because methodology is the backbone of any good study.” These gains were developed through practice with real research problems, including managing field-based data collection for the first time, adapting designs in insecure contexts, and responding to mentor feedback during analysis and revision. It was not framed as merely a technical skill, but as being foundational to researcher credibility and professional identity.

Despite these largely positive experiences with the programme, some researchers identified uneven support, particularly during data analysis and post-fieldwork stages. These expectations, however, should be interpreted in light of the programme’s broader objectives. GDN’s approach did not aim primarily to produce highly specialized methodological expertise or to ensure publication in top academic journals. Rather, the programme sought to provide early-career researchers with the opportunity to design and implement their own policy-relevant research, often earlier in their careers than would otherwise be possible within traditional academic hierarchies. In many research environments, young scholars spend extended periods contributing to senior researchers’ projects before leading their own work. By contrast, the programme enabled grantees to formulate independent research questions, manage their own projects, and make substantive methodological and analytical decisions. Within this framing, the value of the programme lies not only in methodological strengthening but also in enabling researcher autonomy and professional agency. While some participants expressed interest in deeper methodological specialization, these expectations reflect the natural ambitions of emerging researchers rather than a core design objective of the programme.

Several participants noted that while basic methodological training was provided, it did not fully meet expectations for more advanced analytical needs, especially in qualitative analysis. As one researcher explained, “I would have liked more support on data analysis, especially qualitative analysis [...] the programme did not fully meet this need.” Practical challenges compounded these gaps. Some researchers reported difficulties using subscription-based software provided through the programme, citing steep learning

curves and limited guidance. One grantee noted, “I used Atlas.ti, as the license was paid by the programme, but the learning curve was steep and it was up to me to figure out how to use it.” Others faced more fundamental delays related to methodological support. One researcher described repeated setbacks due to postponed training and limited access to appropriate expertise: “[First] the training was delayed. I was supposed to have finished in December or even January... in February I hadn't even started the training yet. [And] my mentor didn't really master my methodology. I had heard that there was a teacher in Bobo Julasso who was a specialist, but he didn't have time. So, he referred me to another professor who was finally able to help me move forward.” In response, some researchers relied heavily on prior doctoral training or local collaborators to complete analysis, while others struggled to align data outputs with publication standards. Together, these accounts suggest that while GDN’s programmes effectively supported end-to-end research execution and strengthened integrated research competence, additional targeted support for advanced analysis could further respond to the aspirations of some researchers, while remaining consistent with the programme’s core objective of enabling independent, policy-relevant research leadership.

At the same time, these expectations should be interpreted in light of the programme’s broader objectives. GDN’s approach did not aim primarily to produce highly specialized methodological expertise or to ensure publication in top academic journals. Rather, the programme sought to provide early-career researchers with the opportunity to design and implement their own policy-relevant research, often earlier in their careers than would otherwise be possible within traditional academic hierarchies. In many research environments, young scholars spend extended periods contributing to senior researchers’ projects before leading their own work. By contrast, the programme enabled grantees to formulate independent research questions, manage their own projects, and make substantive methodological and analytical decisions. Within this framing, the value of the programme lies not only in methodological strengthening but also in enabling researcher autonomy and professional agency. While some participants expressed interest in deeper methodological specialization, these expectations reflect the natural ambitions of emerging researchers rather than a core design objective of the programme.

Finding 2: Mentorship accelerated individual researcher autonomy and professionalisation.

Mentorship emerged as the primary mechanism through which individual capacity gains were consolidated and translated into autonomous research practice. Interviews indicate that mentors did more than provide technical advice: they modelled professional research standards, supported decision-making, and guided researchers through unfamiliar dimensions of the research process. As one young researcher explained, “the GDN mentorship component was what differentiated the GDN programme from other scholarships I have had. In many programmes, mentors are not actively involved. They sign documents or provide general comments, but they do not really follow the

researcher. But my mentor was engaged, accessible, and accountable. This level of engagement was unique and extremely beneficial as it helped me become stronger and more independent as I gained new skills." Survey responses confirm the centrality of mentoring: respondents rated the usefulness of mentor feedback at an average of approximately 4.5 out of 5.

A defining feature of the mentoring approach was its deliberate focus on fostering autonomy. Grantees' accounts of mentors "stepping back" aligned closely with mentors' own descriptions of their role. This convergence suggests that autonomy was not an incidental outcome, but an implicit design principle. As one mentor stated, "we were forbidden from doing the work for the mentee. We had to guide them, not replace them." Several participants described how this approach reduced dependence on supervisors and strengthened confidence in their own decision-making. One researcher reflected, "before, I always needed validation at every step. Now, I feel able to defend my choices and move forward." Another emphasised the applied nature of mentoring: "The mentor did not just tell me what to do. We discussed options, what would happen with each option, and I learned how to decide."

Many grantees described mentoring as intensive, particularly during the early stages of their projects, when research structure and design was being established. One researcher noted, "the mentors helped us from the beginning with defining objectives, expected results, the research problem, and the design of the project." Another highlighted both the frequency and early-stage focus of engagement: "for two years, we met every two or three weeks, every Friday, to discuss progress [...][the mentor] really helped me upstream when I was setting up the project." Survey responses also suggest that mentoring was generally active rather than nominal: most respondents reported meeting their mentor at least monthly, and many described more frequent contact. For several researchers, the accessibility of mentors was a critical factor, with one stating, "whenever I was unsure about something, the mentors provided guidance on every aspect of my research." As projects progressed, mentoring support evolved from close guidance toward progressive withdrawal, enabling researchers to assume greater responsibility. This transition marked a shift from dependent or fragmented research activity, to autonomous research practice. Many grantees described the GDN programme as their first opportunity to design, manage, and complete a research project independently. One researcher stated that "before GDN, I hadn't really had to work on a project from start to finish on my own," while another explained, "my mentor supported me to conduct research from start to finish, [and the support] met my needs." This support extended beyond intellectual design, to include operational and managerial responsibilities like budgeting, planning, and reporting. As one participant reflected, "with the advice of my mentor, I realised that doing research also means becoming a manager."

Mentors confirmed this progression toward autonomy, often describing it as a visible and meaningful shift. One mentor observed, "at first, he was very dependent on me and had

few independent ideas [...] but he started to gain autonomy. One memorable incident was when he called me at two in the morning, saying he had an idea about the methodology [...] I told him that if he was still awake at that hour, it meant he was getting into research. That's when I realised he was committed and gaining autonomy." Another mentor described how engagement changed over time: "He became more autonomous, took more initiative, and made decisions independently." These accounts suggest a deliberate transition from student-like dependence to a more independent researcher identity: a core marker of sustainable individual-level research capacity strengthening.

Importantly, mentoring functioned as an applied learning process. Rather than delivering abstract guidance, mentors supported researchers in responding to real challenges, including revising designs, interpreting results, and adapting to feedback. This experiential approach accelerated learning and helped translate competence into practice. Capacity strengthening is demonstrated not by continued reliance on support, but by reduced reliance over time; grantees described increased autonomy in defining research questions, aligning methods with objectives, and managing timelines and deliverables.

While mentoring quality was generally praised, effectiveness and impact were not uniform. In a number of cases, disciplinary distance limited technical depth, as one mentee noted: "My mentor was an economist, while I was working in environmental sciences. This created methodological mismatches [throughout the process]." Another researcher echoed this challenge, explaining that "the difficulty was that I do qualitative sociology and my mentor was a quantitative economist and statistician. Our specialities were very different." Others highlighted constraints related to mentoring modality, particularly where engagement was fully virtual. As one grantee explained, "the only limitation was that the mentorship was entirely virtual, which made interaction more difficult." Connectivity challenges compounded these limitations in low-infrastructure contexts: "the network was often weak in certain areas, which made it difficult to participate fully." In at least one case, language further constrained the relationship. One researcher reflected, "my mentor was an English speaker who publishes extensively in the United States. My English is terrible, and I work in a French-speaking world, so it made our engagement very difficult due to the language barrier." In some cases, unclear expectations around authorship and reporting also created friction. One grantee reported that "toward the end, [our] collaboration shifted due to disagreements about co-authorship," while a mentor reflected, "the mentee submitted his final report directly to the project manager without showing it to me first [...] I did not appreciate that moment." These experiences point to the importance of clearer upfront agreements on disciplinary fit, language considerations, roles, review processes, and publication pathways to support effective mentoring relationships.

These variations should also be understood in relation to programme management capacity. Mentoring within the GDN programme was intentionally treated as a human

relationship requiring flexibility rather than rigid oversight. At the same time, the scale of the programme created structural constraints. The portfolio of young researcher grants was managed by a single programme officer at GDN, who was responsible for overseeing approximately 120 contracts alongside other responsibilities. Under such conditions, it was not always possible to closely monitor mentoring relationships or intervene when challenges emerged. While most mentoring partnerships functioned effectively, this staffing ratio limits the degree of accompaniment possible in a capacity-building programme.

Finding 3: Project reporting and grant management skills emerged as a hidden but critical capacity gain.

Beyond methodological competence, GDN's programme strengthened a set of practical capacities essential for sustaining research careers, particularly project management, budgeting, reporting, and grant administration. Interviewees noted that these skills were rarely taught within their institutional environments, despite being critical for securing, managing, and sustaining research funding. For many early-career researchers, participation in the GDN programme represented their first exposure to the full operational dimensions of research projects, including drafting proposals, developing itemised budgets, managing timelines, and reporting to donors. As one early-career researcher stated, "during the programme, I learned how to plan activities, manage the budget, and respect the financial reporting requirements, because I had to report to GDN." This highlights a structural gap in many academic training pathways, wherein scientific skills are prioritised, but the operational competencies required to sustain research careers are largely absent.

Interviews likewise indicated that the programme provided many grantees with their first experience of structured grant management. Several participants described this exposure as transformative. One grantee explained, "I have never seen a grant that takes this form, with a deliverable and capacity building in terms of budgeting and project writing." Another emphasised the novelty of the experience: "This was my very first experience managing a project." Analytically, these competencies are not ancillary to research quality, rather they are enabling conditions for sustained research engagement. As one respondent reflected, "I had to submit technical and financial reports, which was new for me. It helped me understand what donors expect [in terms of reporting requirements]." The ability to manage grants, coordinate activities, and comply with donor requirements directly affects researchers' competitiveness and their capacity to remain active beyond isolated projects.

Across interviews, grantees and mentors referred to a structured set of recurring technical and financial deliverables, tied to tranche-based disbursement and regular reporting cycles. These included milestone-based technical progress reports (often

quarterly), itemised expenditure reports, and financial documentation justifying expenses against approved budgets. These requirements were not informal expectations, but explicitly mandated by GDN through three mechanisms: tranche-linked accountability for disbursements, mentor oversight to review and validate deliverables, and reporting formats aligned with donor standards (rather than academic norms). As one grantee noted, "we had to produce deliverables every three months with supporting documentation. That helped me a lot [in terms of understanding grant management processes]." Another researcher explained how this structure supported planning and discipline, stating that the cycle helped them "know how to plan ahead and avoid being overwhelmed." Participants described having to track progress against research plans, document data collection and analysis activities, and justify deviations or delays. As one participant summarised, "reporting was demanding, but it trained me to be more rigorous and organised."

From a systems perspective, these experiences reflect professionalisation rather than discrete skills acquisition. Several interviewees explicitly linked project management capacity to their evolving professional identity. One researcher observed, "doing research also means becoming a manager. You have to manage financial, human and material resources." Another reflected on the broader implications for their career trajectory: "Before, I didn't have a clear idea of academic scientific research projects [...] This grant allowed me to develop another skill in the academic and scientific field." A striking cross-cutting finding is that project and grant management skills were perceived as equally important as scientific skills, yet were almost universally new to participants. Collectively, the data indicates that individual-level research capacity strengthening enabled researchers' to function as project leaders rather than solely as analysts, a shift with long-term implications for research sustainability and competitiveness in contemporary research systems.

At the same time, several early-career researchers highlighted financial management challenges linked to delayed or constrained disbursements. As one noted, "sometimes funding came late, and there were issues in disbursements...and the amount disbursed was sometimes lower than what had been budgeted for certain activities, which created challenges we had to manage." Another explained that tranche limits disrupted fieldwork planning: "Initially, we wanted a larger first disbursement to complete most of the fieldwork, but there was a maximum limit per tranche. This forced us to split fieldwork into two rounds." Delays of several weeks were also reported, requiring teams to adjust timelines during critical data collection phases.

Finding 4: Confidence, visibility, and credibility were central outcomes, not peripheral effects.

Confidence, visibility, and professional identity emerged not as peripheral psychological effects, but as central mechanisms through which individual-level capacity gains

translated into sustained research engagement. Interviews showed that confidence functioned as a multiplier: enabling persistence, risk-taking, and engagement with competitive academic environments. Grantees linked increased confidence to concrete behavioural changes, including applying for other grants, submitting articles to peer-reviewed journals, speaking at seminars, and engaging with international opportunities. Survey data supports these reported shifts: 60% of respondents reported securing new professional opportunities or having them currently in progress following their participation in the programme. This shift in self-perception reduced perceived barriers to participation in competitive research spaces and enabled persistence through long publication and funding cycles.

Across interviews, grantees identified confidence and professional identity as among the most significant outcomes of participation in the GDN programme. Competitive selection, mentoring, and the production of visible outputs contributed to a clear sense of "before and after" in their careers. As one grantee stated, "GDN was the catalyst that boosted my confidence in myself and my career as a researcher." This confidence was multifaceted. According to one participant: "I have more confidence in my own technical research abilities." Others highlighted confidence in academic writing and proposal development: "I joined another programme, not exactly the same as the GDN, but it also provides support for writing an article. [...].. I will highlight my work with the GDN and I will write this project with more confidence."

For some, these gains extended to public presentation and professional presence: "I felt extremely proud and confident during the session organised by the laboratory to present the scholarship recipients' research. I [now] have more professional self-confidence." Increased confidence was also frequently linked to greater willingness to pursue opportunities and engage beyond local academic environments. One participant noted, "I now pursue international opportunities without feeling self-conscious." These shifts suggest that confidence operated not only as an internal state, but as a catalyst for behavioural change: encouraging researchers to test their capacities in competitive and unfamiliar spaces.

Interviews indicate that credibility and visibility derived from the GDN programme also translated into concrete professional opportunities for some participants. One grantee described a clear trajectory of progression: "When I was competing for a researcher [position] at the university, I explained to the jury [about the] research project that I had just obtained with GDN, and they were very impressed. I think it helped facilitate my recruitment as a researcher. [Later] I was recruited as a researcher with UNESCO, and they were also impressed by my GDN work." Another reported institutional recognition linked explicitly to GDN participation: "I joined the university's Centre for Development Research as a research associate. They appreciated the research skills I developed through my involvement in the GDN, telling me they could rely on me." Others noted

advancement within existing institutions: “I have been promoted. The conditions for the grade change committee include participation in programmes and conducting research. Conducting work within the framework of the GDN played an important role in the grade change.”

Nearly all interviewees described a strengthened professional self-identification as researchers. Competitive selection into the GDN programme, mentoring relationships, and visible outputs reinforced legitimacy within academic institutions. One grantee shared, “being part of the programme gave me recognition inside the university. It increased my academic credibility.” Professional networks expanded through conferences, workshops, cohort interactions, mentors, and shared platforms: “We shared opportunities, publications, and experiences through discussion networks.” Survey responses reflect similar patterns: respondents rated the usefulness of the networks created through the programme at just over 4 out of 5 on average. Said confidence gains were repeatedly linked to recognition and visibility: “Being selected among many candidates boosted my confidence and independence as a young researcher,” and “being a GDN grantee adds visibility and recognition [...] colleagues and [other] students showed interest.” Crucially, credibility was tied to research outputs: “Research credibility is tied to publications [...] once the article is published it will add even more visibility.”

In other words, confidence, visibility, and professional identity acted as key intermediate outcomes, linking individual capacity gains to sustained research engagement and career progression. These mechanisms helped researchers to navigate competitive systems, persist through long research cycles, and position themselves for professional opportunities, ultimately supporting a shift from marginal participation, towards more active and visible roles within research communities.

Finding 5: Early career progression and leadership opportunities emerged, but remained time lagged.

The time-lag observed between capacity strengthening and formal career advancement is consistent with academic labour market structures in participating countries. Rather than signalling weak impact, this lag (approximately 3-4 months) reflects promotion systems that privilege publication records, grant histories, and seniority, over short-term performance gains. From a programme standpoint, the more consistent and immediate outcome of GDN’s initiatives was strengthened career readiness via improved competitiveness for grants, greater confidence in interviews and panels, and expanded leadership responsibilities within projects and teams. Survey results suggest strong continuity of engagement: all respondents reported that they intend to continue research in the same field, including 97% who described this as very likely. These forms of progression are best understood as precursors to formal advancement, rather than substitutes for it: reinforcing the need for temporal measures of change when assessing future individual-level research capacity strengthening outcomes.

Analytically, the research suggests that the GDN programme laid the foundations for longer-term career advancement, even where immediate outcomes were limited. Some participants highlighted non-linear, but still meaningful, professional effects (including diversification of career pathways). One respondent noted, "through the GDN programme, I learned to use artificial intelligence tools for analysis, which later helped me secure a position in a technology consulting firm." Others emphasised improved readiness and positioning rather than immediate advancement: "I obtained another scholarship afterwards, and the fact that I had already received GDN funding increased my credibility as a researcher." These accounts indicate that even where promotions or appointments were delayed, GDN participation strengthened researchers' competitiveness and professional standing.

One grantee reflected on expanded responsibilities, rather than immediate promotion: "I have worked at the National Cartography Institute for several years, but since GDN, it helped me integrate teams working on new collaborations and conventions with other institutions and supported my involvement in regional planning and monitoring workshops. I have joined new teams and technical committees and took on more responsibilities, and I plan to compete for the Senior Researcher Award soon." Others articulated future-oriented optimism grounded in enhanced capacity: "I have not yet [got a new position]. After finishing my studies, I plan to return home to teach. The skills I gained in group management and leadership will help me to design and lead new projects that create opportunities for other young researchers." Another participant noted delayed but anticipated visibility effects: "After the initial presentations, we did not receive new feedback or opportunities. But I believe that once the article is published, the visibility will increase, and new opportunities may emerge. That will likely open more doors."

These examples illustrate that while some grantees achieved immediate gains, many experienced career impact as prospective, and remain dependent on publication cycles and academic labour markets.

Evaluation Question:
Are these skills being used, sustained, and diffused to others (e.g. through peer mentoring)?

Finding 6: Skill diffusion occurred primarily through informal peer pathways, not via structured cascades.

Interviews indicates that individual-level capacity gains were diffused primarily through informal and relational pathways, rather than through formalised cascade mechanisms. Survey data points in the same direction: all respondents reported connecting with other young researchers through the programme, 70% had already collaborated with

researchers or institutions from other Francophone African countries, and all reported still using the skills acquired. In contexts where doctoral supervision, formal mentoring systems, and structured peer-learning platforms are weak or absent, informal diffusion through advice-seeking, role-modelling, and collaborative problem-solving represents a credible and context-appropriate transmission pathway. The large volume of informal diffusion observed among GDN participants therefore reflects structural constraints within research systems, rather than a limitation of the programme itself.

Across interviews, grantees described becoming reference points for peers seeking methodological, analytical, or procedural guidance following participation in the GDN programme. One respondent noted, “colleagues now consult me for methodological advice,” while another explained, “people now come to me to ask how to structure a research proposal or how to approach data analysis.” This directional shift (from recipient of guidance to source of advice) signals a meaningful change in local knowledge hierarchies and constitutes an early indicator of system-level spillover. In several cases, diffusion extended to students and junior researchers, particularly where grantees were embedded in universities or research centres. As one grantee noted, “after returning, my institution invited me to train students on how to find funding and conduct research.” These interactions suggest that GDN grantees functioned as informal capacity nodes: transmitting research norms, methods, and expectations through day-to-day professional interactions.

Beyond direct advice-giving, respondents highlighted role-modelling as a low-cost (but powerful) diffusion mechanism, particularly in environments with limited access to funding, mentoring, and international exposure. Grantees described demonstration effects that shaped peers’ aspirations, even where direct skills transfer did not occur. As one participant explained, “being a GDN grantee showed younger researchers that it is possible,” while another noted, “some young researchers told me that seeing my experience encouraged them to apply for similar opportunities.” Horizontal diffusion was further facilitated through informal peer networks, particularly cohort interactions and messaging platforms: “We regularly share opportunities like calls for papers and grant announcements.” These exchanges reinforced motivation and awareness, contributing to aspiration-building among peers.

At the same time, the data indicates that diffusion was uneven and contingent on individual initiative and institutional context. While some grantees reported active peer engagement, others described limited interaction and weak network effects. One researcher stated bluntly, “apart from participating in conferences, there is no contact with others in the cohort or in my institution. Everyone is in their own corner.” Others noted limitations in virtual networking tools: “The WhatsApp forum system still doesn't work,” and confirmed that exchange occurred “only through informal contacts.” In several cases, weak institutional engagement constrained spillover effects, as one participant reflected, “I applied what I learned myself, but it was difficult to change how others work.”

These experiences highlight institutional context as a critical mediating factor, shaping whether individual-level gains translate into collective effects.

In a smaller number of cases, diffusion occurred through more structured institutional channels, such as internal seminars, workshops, or teaching responsibilities. Grantees described sharing methodologies and publication strategies through formal platforms: "I shared my experience during seminars in my department, especially on how to structure a paper and respond to reviewers," and "I explained to colleagues how the [training and support] worked and what was expected at each stage of the research." Where host institutions created spaces for dissemination, diffusion was stronger. As one participant noted, "my work was presented within the laboratory, which helped other doctoral students understand how research can lead to funding opportunities." These examples illustrate vertical synergy, wherein institutional platforms amplified individual-level capacity gains.

Several respondents explicitly acknowledged the limits of diffusion in fragmented or competitive institutional environments. As one researcher observed, "networking did not flourish because there was a lack of activity in the group." Others cited heavy workloads and precarious employment conditions as barriers to sustained peer support. These constraints underscore that while informal diffusion is necessary, it is not solely sufficient for sustained research capacity strengthening. Without supportive institutional incentives and collective research cultures, diffusion remains fragile and uneven.

In other words, skill diffusion following GDN participation occurred widely, but informally, via advice-seeking, role-modelling, and opportunistic peer exchange (rather than through structured cascade mechanisms). Individual-level research capacity strengthening generated meaningful spillovers, but their scale and durability depended heavily on institutional conditions. This finding suggests that individual capacity gains are most likely to contribute to broader system-level change when they are embedded within organisations that recognise, support, and incentivise peer mentoring and collaborative practice. Individual research grants and projects alone cannot be expected to transform institutional research cultures.

Evaluation Question:
Did individual-level research capacity strengthening translate into improved research outputs?

Finding 7: Research productivity increased, though outcomes were emerging, rather than fully realised.

The research productivity gains observed among GDN grantees are best interpreted not simply as increases in output volume, but as evidence of improved productive efficiency

and strategic engagement with the full research cycle. For example, grantees stated that they became better able to manage publication timelines, respond to peer reviews, and select appropriate dissemination outlets: all capacities that shape long-term productivity. Importantly though, productivity gains were uneven across participants, reflecting differences in institutional support and context, disciplinary norms, and opportunity structures. This variation underscores that individual-level productivity is shaped by the interaction between personal capacity and enabling environments, and that short-term output measures should be interpreted alongside evidence of improved research project management and readiness for future production. From a research capacity strengthening perspective, the sustainability of these gains is best understood in terms of *capacity permanence,* rather than immediate outcome permanence.[5]

Interviews provide support for the conclusion that individual-level capacity gains translated into tangible research outputs, even where publication pipelines were still underway. Grantees reported published articles, accepted manuscripts, and active submissions, often describing these as firsts in their academic careers: “One article has already been published from this study [...] it was submitted and should be published in December,” and “the publication is scheduled for early 2026.” In fact, all 60 participants in the IRCB Volet 2 program have submitted journal articles, and at the time of writing this report, 10 have been published in scientific journals. Likewise, survey responses show similar patterns: 97% of respondents reported having completed and disseminated their research either entirely or partially, and 93% had already presented or published results, including many at international level. Several participants noted that publication timelines were longer than anticipated, but that the programme helped them to better understand the process and manage their expectations: “publications with a peer review committee take at least six to eight months [...] sometimes it’s two years.” Even where outputs were incomplete at the time of interview, participants linked their increased productivity to enhanced competence and confidence: “I am working on articles now that I would not have been able to write before.”

Beyond journal publications, many grantees reported first-time participation in national and international conferences, representing a qualitative shift in professional engagement. These experiences enhanced visibility, confidence, and integration into research communities. One grantee stated that “this research enabled me to present at conferences in several countries,” and another stated “I presented my research at an international conference with over a hundred participants.” Conference participation therefore functioned both as an output and as a reinforcing mechanism, enabling peer feedback, exposure to international standards, and motivation to continue publishing.

[5] Capacity permanence refers to the sustained ability of individuals, organisations, or systems to function, adapt, and solve problems (regardless of whether that capacity produces a specific, intended result at any single moment in time). It emphasises the lasting "functional potential" that remains after an intervention has ceased. Outcome permanence, on the other hand, focuses on the lasting nature of a specific result, like a completed project.

A smaller but notable subset of grantees reported dissemination of findings to policy actors and local authorities, indicating early signs of relevance beyond academic audiences. As one respondent noted, “I presented the key findings to the sub-prefect of the study area.” While not a primary objective of the GDN programme, these examples suggest that strengthened individual capacity can support knowledge translation when embedded within institutional or local governance relationships.

Mentors and grantees alike emphasised that productivity gains were accompanied by qualitative improvements in research outputs, including stronger logic, methodological rigor, and analytical depth. Respondents observed that “the quality of the work improved, especially in coherence and analytical depth,” and “when a student manages to write an article, they have used a lot of skills along the way.” Others highlighted concrete improvements in publication readiness: “The mentor helped me improve research design, methodology, analysis [...] and strengthen the coherence of my research,” and “this experience broadened my research, writing, data-collection, and publication skills.” These accounts indicate that GDN’s programme strengthened research quality as well as productivity.

Finally, several grantees emphasised that the programme enabled continued research activity beyond the granteeship period. Participants described applying newly acquired skills to subsequent grants, collaborations, or independent projects: “The skills I gained are now being used in other research projects.” Analytically, this suggests that individual-level research capacity strengthening contributed to the development of a pipeline of research outputs, rather than short-term output spikes. Given the long timelines inherent in research and publication cycles, the presence of emerging productivity signals is consistent with effective and durable capacity strengthening.

6.2 Institutional Level Findings

This section assesses institutional-level research capacity strengthening, focusing on whether GDN-supported interventions led to measurable and sustained improvements in organisational research systems, practices, and performance. The analysis examines changes in governance and administrative arrangements, research management systems, organisational research culture, and the ability of institutions to define, implement, and sustain research agendas. Drawing on interviews from institutional leaders, programme staff, mentors, and affiliated researchers, the section assesses whether individual-level capacity gains were absorbed into institutional routines and translated into enhanced research productivity, credibility, and sustainability.

Evaluation Question:

Did institutional processes become more efficient, transparent, or supportive of research?

Finding 8: Formal governance and administrative systems replaced ad hoc research management.

GDN-supported interventions catalysed a decisive shift from informal and personality-driven research activity, toward more formalised governance systems that enabled research to function as a legitimate and accountable institutional activity. Rather than introducing isolated procedures, the programme reshaped how institutions organised, authorised, and represented research, addressing a core structural constraint in emerging research environments: the absence of governance frameworks through which research can be coordinated, funded, and recognised beyond individual initiative.

Many institutions entered the programme with governance arrangements that existed in name, but not in practice. As one institutional leader explained, "the laboratory existed, but there were no internal regulations, no clearly defined research axes. Governance was a key gap." Another respondent described how research functioned primarily through informal personal networks rather than institutional systems: "Initially, it worked like friends getting together. At some point, we needed to formalize things: clear roles, meeting agendas, minutes." These conditions limited coordination, accountability, and institutional credibility, constraining both internal functioning and external fundability. These challenges were further compounded in university settings, where researchers often faced heavy teaching loads and limited institutional incentives for research, reinforcing reliance on informal and individualised approaches rather than structured systems.

GDN's programme expectations explicitly extended beyond project delivery to institutional strengthening, creating incentives and pressure to formalise governance. As one institution noted, "our expectation was not only to carry out the project, but also [...] to really strengthen our institutional capacities to improve governance and then facilitate the mobilization of resources." In practice, this translated into the establishment or consolidation of formal governance mechanisms, including laboratories, research committees, internal regulations, and leadership structures that clarified authority and reduced dependence on individual actors.

The creation or recognition of formal research entities (particularly laboratories) emerged as a pivotal reform. In several cases universities stated that the absence of a recognised laboratory had been a binding constraint on institutional legitimacy and funding access. As one respondent stated, "before GDN funding, there was no laboratory. There were separate research teams, but no institutional structure that brought them together."

Another was explicit about the implications for fundability: “Without a laboratory, you simply cannot apply to certain calls.” GDN’s programme support enabled institutions to move from fragmented research teams to collective and governable entities with shared purpose. Another mentor observed, “the creation of [the institute] changed everything; it gave them identity, visibility, and legitimacy.” Similarly, another institutional leader noted, “we also became more organized. The laboratory now has internal regulations, and we developed a strategic plan for 2025-2030 with a five-year vision.” For several institutions, laboratories established with programme support became the first formally recognised research units within their universities, marking a qualitative shift in institutional standing.

Importantly, governance formalisation was not experienced as bureaucratisation, but as enabling institutional legibility: the ability to function as a recognised research actor in the eyes of donors, partners, and policymakers. As one respondent reflected, “the most important support was the structuring of the laboratory [...] helping us define indicators, work on the theory of change, and develop a strategic plan.” These changes strengthened internal coordination, clarified leadership roles, and enhanced external credibility, laying the foundations for subsequent gains in administration, funding access, and research culture.

Think tank experiences, however, indicate more incremental progress toward organisational structuring and governance, with respondents reporting less emphasis on improving formal governance and administrative systems under the GDN programme. Instead, many think tanks continued to operate through project-based or externally constrained arrangements, with governance strengthening remaining an uneven process across partners.

Overall, this finding demonstrates that formal governance structures functioned as a prerequisite for institutional research capacity. By shifting research from informal and person-centred arrangements to system-centred organisational forms, the programme enabled institutions to operate as credible, coordinated, and fundable research actors. These governance reforms constitute a foundational institutional capacity gain, without which subsequent improvements in productivity, financing, and external engagement would not have been possible, as detailed in the findings below.

Finding 9: Administrative and financial processes became more transparent, professional, and research-enabling.

Across interviews, respondents described pre-programme research administration as informal, fragmented, and misaligned with donor requirements. While research activity existed, institutions lacked the administrative and financial capacities required to access and manage external funding. One institutional leader explained that “our researchers were not well trained in research proposal writing or fundraising for research,” and that

the institution had “very little experience managing projects,” meaning that donors required “proof that the university had already managed a grant of a certain size, which was not the case for us.” These constraints limited funding access, regardless of research quality.

Programme participation also introduced structured planning, monitoring, and alignment tools that professionalised administrative practice and embedded research management within institutional operations. At one University, this shift was described as foundational: “The most important support was the structuring of the laboratory [...] defining indicators and a clear agenda tied to a concrete plan.” Mentors confirmed that such operational capacities were largely absent prior to the programme, noting that “some members did not even know what an indicator was, so it was a big learning experience for them.” Rather than abstract training, these competencies were developed through applied implementation, reinforcing learning-by-doing. As one mentor observed, “there was no framework identifying what capacities needed to be strengthened,” resulting in uneven starting points, but embedding learning directly into day-to-day practice.

Financial management reforms were among the most significant changes. In several institutions, prior practices undermined transparency and donor confidence. One respondent described that “previously, all project funds were deposited in the university’s general account,” limiting project-level oversight. Programme participation enabled a clear shift toward ring-fenced financial management: “Now, each project has a dedicated account with two signatories: the project manager and a representative of the administrative department. This is a major shift in mindset and governance.” This reform directly addressed donor risk concerns, while strengthening internal accountability and financial discipline.

Regular technical and financial reporting were described as demanding but formative: “Quarterly narrative and financial reports forced us to professionalize our processes.” Respondents highlighted that these routines strengthened planning, documentation, and anticipatory decision-making, replacing reactive management. One respondent reflected that this experience enhanced institutional credibility: “Now when we apply for funding, we can say that we have already managed a 96,000-euro project with GDN and AFD. This strengthens our credibility and confidence.” Another noted that structured reporting reduced uncertainty by “reducing last-minute decision-making and reinforcing accountability” across teams.

Administrative strengthening extended beyond academic leadership and into operational support roles, which had previously been marginal to research capacity efforts. As one institutional leader noted, “in research, people focus on professors and researchers, but administrative personnel, secretaries, support staff, IT technicians, and lab technicians also play an important role.” In several cases, programme support enabled the

establishment of laboratory secretariats for the first time. A mentor explained that “there was no [laboratory] secretariat at the beginning,” requiring institutions to “creatively reassign staff time or allocate project resources to establish basic administrative functions.” While fragile, these changes addressed a systemic gap: the absence of professional research administration as a recognised institutional function.

Mentors likewise emphasised the importance of dedicated project management roles. One explained that appointing “a full-time project assistant within the university to handle daily management, reporting, and financial administration was essential because the researchers already had teaching and research duties.” This adjustment reduced administrative bottlenecks, improved implementation efficiency, and prevented research activities from stalling due to overload.

At the same time, respondents identified sustainability risks. While administrative systems improved, several support functions remained dependent on project financing. As one mentor cautioned, "I'm not entirely sure that this is a sustainable arrangement,” noting that long-term viability would depend on whether universities institutionalised these roles within their core budgets. This concern was echoed by the director of a newly established laboratory, who observed, “so the challenge is to succeed in sustaining these activities that are in our action plan and that have been financed by the GDN.”

GDN-supported interventions improved the transparency, predictability, and research-enabling nature of administrative and financial systems. Rather than layering new requirements onto weak structures, the programme fostered the emergence of professional research management practices, aligned with donor standards and institutional needs. While sustainability beyond the project lifecycle remains uneven, the findings point to a substantive shift from informal administration and toward professionalised research support, which is an essential condition for sustained research activity and funding mobilisation.

This finding echoes earlier observations regarding early-career researchers, in that both reflect the programme’s role in strengthening underlying research system capabilities. However, the dynamics differ across levels. For young researchers, the programme primarily strengthened individual skills, networks, and professional trajectories. At the institutional level, by contrast, the intervention influenced organisational systems, such as financial management, grant administration, and compliance practices, that shape how research is supported and managed over time. These changes affect a broader institutional ecosystem and can persist beyond individual participants, even if their long-term consolidation depends on continued institutional commitment and resource mobilisation.

Finding 10: Institutional research culture became more collective, outward-facing, and supportive of research practice.

Beyond formal governance and administrative reforms, a shift in institutional research culture among participating organisations was observed. GDN-supported interventions contributed to "repositioning research as a shared institutional goal," as one respondent put it, by placing greater emphasis on public, policy, and regional relevance. Interviewees described a reframing of institutional identity, moving research beyond internally contained academic activity. As one respondent stated, "we are a research institution, but our work is oriented toward action. We do not want to remain purely academic." Another explained how this shift altered institutional positioning: "We then became a facilitator of multi-stakeholder dialogue [...] connected to the government." These accounts reflect a reorientation of research toward engagement with decision-making processes and societal actors.

Laboratory-based organisation reinforced collective research norms by reshaping how researchers related to one another. Prior to the programme, research was commonly organised around isolated teams with limited coordination. As one interviewee explained, "[Before] there [...] were separate research teams [...]. The goal was to bring these researchers together into a single laboratory with a shared identity and thematic focus." The move to laboratory structures fostered collaboration and reduced researcher isolation. As a mentor observed, "moving from separate teams to a laboratory structure has encouraged multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary exchanges." These changes supported the emergence of collective research identities at the institutional level.

Institutions also made deliberate investments in research visibility and communication, which respondents identified as among the most immediate cultural changes. As one interviewee noted, "visibility showed the most immediate progress." This took the form of public-facing events, such as hosting conferences and scientific days. At one university, "the team organized scientific days to mark the laboratory's launch, including a roundtable with former ministers and one current minister." Visibility was further institutionalized through communication platforms. The majority of institutions participating in GDN's programmes recognized the importance of establishing an online presence and subsequently allocated programme funding to the development of institutional websites. One respondent explained that "the new laboratory structure enabled the creation of a website and the hiring of a communications manager to improve online communication and highlight research outputs." These practices reframed research as a public and networked activity, rather than a product confined to only academic circulation.

Outward-facing practices became increasingly routinised, rather than episodic. As one interviewee explained, "we organised international conferences and research fairs

regularly [...] the idea was also to popularise research and bring it out of theses and dissertations." This routinisation supported sustained collaboration, mentoring, and productivity beyond individual project cycles, signalling a shift from event-driven visibility to embedded institutional practice.

Several respondents described a parallel change in how institutions positioned themselves within broader research and policy ecosystems. One mentor highlighted proactive engagement beyond institutional boundaries: "When they set up their laboratory, they had the idea of saying to themselves, 'Let's go and talk to the heads of other related laboratories in other universities.'" Others likewise emphasised engagement with national evaluation bodies: "They also established a form of collaboration with the national research body [...] to familiarise themselves with the evaluation codes." These actions indicate growing awareness of standards, legitimacy, and peer benchmarking beyond project compliance.

At the same time, interviewees and mentors highlighted that cultural change progressed more slowly and unevenly than structural or administrative reform. While laboratories, events, and communication strategies created enabling conditions, norms remained partly dependent on individuals. As one interviewee reflected, "the change is gradual." Another mentor noted that "institutional evolution is slow because of rigid legal and administrative frameworks."

Overall, GDN-supported interventions catalysed a meaningful reorientation of institutional research culture. Research became more collective in organisation, more outward-facing in orientation, and more supportive of sustained research practice. While these cultural shifts remain uneven and fragile, they complement governance and administrative reforms by embedding them within shared norms, identities, and expectations: conditions essential for the durability and strengthening of research capacity beyond individual project cycles.

Evaluation Question:
Are institutions better positioned to attract or sustain research funding?

Finding 11: Institutions strengthened their ability to define and implement autonomous and locally grounded research agendas in order to attract research funding.

GDN-supported interventions strengthened participating institutions' capacity to define, protect, and operationalize autonomous research agendas, improving their ability to attract and sustain funding. Rather than reinforcing short-term and donor-driven project

selection, the programme enabled institutions to articulate coherent research priorities more deeply rooted in local contexts, policy needs, and institutional identity. This marked a shift from opportunistic responsiveness, toward agenda-led selectivity and strategic engagement with funding ecosystems. This shift manifested differently across institutional types: while university-based programmes primarily strengthened internal research organisation and collective agenda-setting, the Sahel think tank component placed greater emphasis on externally oriented agendas linked to influencing public debate, policy processes, and real-time decision-making.

Interviewees emphasised that programme instruments preserved institutional autonomy by allowing organisations to advance their own priorities, rather than conform to externally imposed themes. A representative from one institution noted, “we already had our own agenda, things we wanted to do, and we were looking for partners to support us. The instrument put in place by the programme offered that.” This flexibility was particularly important in politically sensitive environments. For think tanks operating in fragile and politically dynamic contexts, this autonomy was closely tied to their ability to engage in policy debates in real time, requiring rapid-response research capacities and strong positioning within policy ecosystems. One think tank used this autonomy to pivot toward evidence-based local research, explaining, “we wanted to conduct local research based on evidence [...] not on the propaganda of those in power."

For several institutions, agenda autonomy was formalized through the development of strategic plans and the reorganization of research units, moving agenda-setting from an individual exercise to a collective institutional function. One laboratory confirmed that the institution used the programme to move from "unstructured" individual initiatives to a coordinated body.

At one university, the programme facilitated the merger of three separate research teams into a single interdisciplinary laboratory. A mentor observed that this consolidation was essential to “establish an identity and visibility around a unifying research topic.” By defining formal research axes and shared strategic visions, institutions moved away from a “mandarinate” model (where research revolves around a single senior academic) and towards more collective laboratory identities, capable of sustaining agendas beyond individual careers.

Agenda autonomy translated into concrete implementation and enhanced credibility with governments and donors. By focusing on decentralisation in an insecure context, one institution positioned itself as a key technical interlocutor for the state. Another institution established a monitoring unit to translate technical research on the demographic dividend into accessible formats for decision-makers, emphasising that “impact means ensuring that decisions are implemented so that they genuinely benefit the population.” This externally oriented agenda-setting was particularly pronounced among think tanks,

whose institutional models are inherently geared toward influencing public policy, facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogue, and translating research into actionable recommendations for decision-makers.

The most significant indicator of institutional maturation was the change in how organisations engaged with funding opportunities. Prior to the programme, many institutions functioned as reactive implementers, but over time, they became agenda-setting actors. One institution described how capacity strengthening helped them "to really strengthen institutional capacities to improve [their research agenda] and then facilitate the mobilisation of resources [to support it]." Interviewees contrasted this approach with earlier behaviour. As one leader explained, "before, we chased funding wherever it appeared. Now, we assess whether a call aligns with our research agenda." This shift reflects a strategic rebalancing of power, with institutions increasingly selecting funding that reinforces, rather than distorts, their current research direction. However, for think tanks, this shift was often constrained by funding volatility and high demand from donors, which in some cases risked pulling organisations in multiple directions and weakening the coherence of their research agendas.

Overall, the GDN programme enabled West African and Sahelian research institutions to reclaim strategic control over their research trajectories. Through flexible funding and technical mentorship, institutions transitioned from fragmented and project-based activities, to programmatic research delivery anchored in locally grounded agendas. The development of long-term strategic plans, success in competitive funding, and influence on national policy debates, all together signal increased fundability, credibility, and sustainability within the regional research ecosystem. A key distinction emerging from the data is that universities and think tanks require differentiated support models: universities benefit from investments that formalise internal research structures and collective agenda-setting, while think tanks require more flexible, externally oriented support that strengthens their ability to engage policy processes, respond to real-time debates, and sustain influence in dynamic political environments.

Finding 12: Institutional credibility and legitimacy with funders, partners, and policy actors increased.

Programme participation functioned as a powerful reputational signal that enhanced institutional credibility with funders, partners, and policy actors. Prior to engagement, many institutions described being excluded from competitive funding spaces or viewed with scepticism by donors. Following GDN-supported reforms, these organisations reported a clear shift in external perception, moving from marginal actors to recognised experts and reliable partners.

For many institutions, the central barrier to funding was not research quality, but the absence of a demonstrable grant-management track record with funders. The GDN programme provided this missing proof point. In one country, where the research landscape was described as crowded with “briefcase NGOs,” one institution reported that programme participation gave the institution a visible and verifiable identity. The team explained that improved communication and professionalised deliverables led to a “tangible strengthening of credibility among partners [...] they could see, even with GDN, that we already existed." Across cases, credibility emerged as a threshold condition: the ability to demonstrate disciplined financial management and reporting, such as one University’s move to project-specific bank accounts, directly influenced donor confidence and fundability.

Formalisation of research entities further enabled institutions to access competitive spaces and funders that were previously closed to them. One mentor noted that “the laboratory became eligible for a new funding programme thanks to the restructuring they undertook during the GDN programme. They obtained funding aligned with their thematic focus on territorial development.” In another country, the laboratory’s participation in international colloquia and training repositioned it as a recognised reference point. As the coordinator explained, “we are becoming known by ministries and seen as a reference laboratory within the Faculty of Humanities.” Recognition by national quality assurance agencies and line ministries strengthened institutional anchoring and ensured inclusion in high-level policy discussions as participating partners.

Credibility gains also translated into sustained influence in politically or operationally difficult contexts. In another country, one institution demonstrated its value to the state during a period of national crisis by engaging with policy actors. As one respondent explained, “we strengthened our credibility with the government through our ability to maintain dialogue on decentralisation, even though the government's priorities were not, at one point, focused on this public policy issue.” Their technical recommendations were subsequently “passed on to the national conference, and many of our recommendations were taken into account.” In another country, the institution leveraged high-quality technical reporting to influence education policy. As one respondent noted, “the Ministry understood the importance of strengthening women’s education [...] so the Ministry adopted a measure to promote women’s access to higher education.” When research outputs were timely, rigorous, and accessible, institutions ceased to be perceived as project NGOs and instead became, as one respondent put it, “facilitators of multi-stakeholder dialogue” between government, researchers, and civil society.

Beyond national contexts, GDN’s Evidence Fairs and regional networking components expanded institutional legitimacy across borders and provided opportunities for partnership. One institution reported a shift in regional standing: “Today, practically all major outlets with research programmes in our country seek our input [...] GDN made it

possible to have regular activities that involved our country but also the wider subregion." The programme also generated a "consortium effect," enabling institutions to collaborate competitively for non-GDN funding. As one participant explained, "we now have potential. If we see a regional call for proposals that requires 3 or 4 countries, we can mobilize 4 or 5 think tanks in our region." By connecting Francophone institutions into visible and credible networks, GDN reduced isolation and strengthened their ability to compete with more established Anglophone research consortia.

Overall, participation in the GDN programme substantially increased institutional reputational capital. By enabling organisations to demonstrate technical quality, financial probity, and policy relevance, the programme shifted them from the margins, toward the centre of national and regional research ecosystems. This transformation is evidenced by successful access to national grants, the establishment of monitoring units at the request of partners, and growing demand for institutional expertise from ministries, donors, and international media.

Finding 13: Proposal development and grant-readiness capacities improved at institutional level.

The data indicates a shift in how participating institutions approached research funding. Prior to the programme, proposal development was commonly weak, unstructured, and concentrated among a small number of "entrepreneurial" individuals. Through technical training, mentoring, and the consolidation of research units, institutions moved from what one respondent described as "low-probability participation," toward credible, competitive, engagement in regional and international funding calls. A central mechanism of change was the demystification of donor expectations, particularly the structured logic required for competitive proposals.

Many researchers, especially junior staff, had limited prior exposure to full proposal development. At one university, proposal writing was explicitly integrated into the institutional action plan to "strengthen the laboratory's ability to seek research funding," with targeted support for both junior and senior researchers. As one coordinator noted, "many young researchers noted it was their first time writing a detailed research proposal with objectives, activities, and a budget." At another university, the programme addressed a recognised skills gap where researchers "were not well trained in research proposal writing or fundraising for research." The institution organised six dedicated trainings on "grant writing, research fundraising, partnership development, and responding to calls for research grants."

Mentorship played a critical reframing role, shifting teams away from overly ambitious or poorly specified ideas, toward feasible and donor-aligned designs. Interviewees described learning to translate research interests into fundable propositions by using

tools such as theories of change and logical frameworks: enabling teams to articulate, justify, and defend their research pathways within donor formats.

Interviewees emphasised that grant-readiness extended beyond individual skills, to institutional eligibility. By consolidating fragmented teams into formal laboratories, institutions met minimum structural requirements of national and international funders. For example, one laboratory used the programme to move beyond individual initiatives, with the coordinator explaining, “the programme strengthened our ability to mobilise resources and identify opportunities. Even unsuccessful proposals helped us build experience. This improved our competitiveness." This shift marked a transition from individual-led bidding to collective laboratory identities capable of sustaining multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary proposals, which are favoured by donors.

The strongest data of improved grant-readiness is demonstrated by success in securing non-programme funding during, or immediately after, participation. One university reported a marked increase in external funding: “In 2024, we won 13 projects and secured scholarships for about 17 researchers [...] our annual reports on research fundraising show a clear increase." Another institution secured two additional projects during their involvement with the GDN programme, including research on “sustainable governance of agricultural land” and on “ecological transition,” both funded by an international NGO. Managing these grants broke a cycle of exclusion, as one respondent noted, it “provided the necessary administrative track record to satisfy the requirements of other major donors."

Overall, the GDN programme shifted institutions away from reactive, low-probability, engagement with funding opportunities. By strengthening proposal development skills, establishing institutional eligibility, and enabling collaborative bidding, the programme built durable grant-readiness capacities. This transition is reflected in a changed institutional mindset, in which funding opportunities are assessed for strategic fit, rather than pursued opportunistically. This laid the groundwork for sustained participation in competitive research funding ecosystems. As one institution director explained, “the project included training on responding to calls for proposals and the new laboratory used the tools to apply for funding. The fact that the laboratory was successful in securing national funding shows that these skills were strengthened.” A laboratory director similarly noted, “we submitted activity proposals for feedback. The mentor helped us understand donor expectations, especially around indicators and eligibility criteria. We have subsequently won several grants.”

Finding 14: Financial management and reporting systems enabled donor compliance.

Programme participation strengthened financial management and reporting discipline, enabling institutions to meet international donor compliance standards. Through the formalisation of tracking systems, the use of standardised administrative tools, the recruitment of dedicated support staff, and adherence to strict reporting cycles, institutions demonstrated levels of transparency and fiduciary control previously beyond reach. While these changes enhanced fundability, they also exposed persistent friction arising from rigid national university frameworks and disbursement delays.

Institutions moved away from unstructured or centralised accounting and toward project-specific financial governance, improving transparency and traceability. For example, one laboratory adopted standardised procedures mandated by the programme. As the coordinator explained, “the project required us to submit funding release requests, which strengthened financial tracking and accountability." At another institution, teams introduced operational tools to align academic work with administrative processes: “We introduced Terms of Reference (TORs) for each activity to improve communication with the administration." These practices extended beyond compliance, serving as credibility signals that institutions could manage fiduciary risk and operate within donor-required accountability frameworks.

A key enabling factor was the introduction of specialised administrative support, recognising that researchers lacked the capacity to manage complex reporting alongside academic responsibilities. A mentor described an early corrective action: “I played a more active role at the beginning [...] introducing one major change, which was adding the recruitment of a full-time project assistant within the university to handle daily management, reporting, and financial administration.” Institutional respondents confirmed the operational impact of this shift. One coordinator noted that “administratively, the project allowed us to recruit an administrative assistant. This improved organisational efficiency in the laboratory and eased the workload related to reporting and project monitoring."

Despite these gains, compliance improvements were constrained by external legal and administrative frameworks. Mentors and researchers highlighted how national university systems limited flexibility and slowed implementation. A mentor observed that “using the funds locally was difficult, due to heavy administrative requirements. Even minor purchases sometimes required multiple signatures. This slowed implementation considerably." Disbursement delays were repeatedly cited as a practical bottleneck. One early career researcher explained that the “main challenge was delays in fund disbursement, which sometimes slowed down field activities." Mentors also reported operational strain. As one mentor reflected, “at one point I was somewhat lost as a mentor about the reporting schedule. This also had consequences for payment deadlines."

A recurring analytical concern related to the sustainability of these compliance systems beyond programme funding. Several mentors noted that administrative gains were often dependent on short-term project staff, rather than permanent institutional arrangements. One mentor observed that “lab administrative duties had to be assigned to a contracted doctoral student, which highlighted a sustainability gap." Another expressed concern about system fragility: “A major fragility I saw was the difficulty of sustaining a human resource dedicated to project follow-up." These accounts suggest that while the programme successfully demonstrated donor-compliant financial management, long-term donor-readiness will depend on whether institutions absorb these administrative functions into core staffing and budget plans.

Overall, the findings indicate that GDN-supported interventions enabled institutions to operate at levels of financial transparency and reporting discipline required by international donors. At the same time, they revealed structural constraints and sustainability risks that extend beyond individual projects. Compliance gains are therefore best understood as proof of capability, rather than guaranteed permanence. Ultimately, underscoring the importance of institutionalising administrative roles and systems if donor readiness is to be sustained beyond the life of the grant.

Finding 15: Funding sustainability remains constrained by external system factors, especially in country-level research ecosystems.

Despite strengthened internal capacities, respondents emphasised that their ability to attract and sustain research funding remained constrained by external, system-level, factors (beyond institutional control). These included limited domestic research funding, donor concentration in a narrow set of thematic priorities, political instability, and weak national commissioning of research. The data highlights a persistent gap between institutional readiness and the availability of stable funding within national and regional ecosystems.

Political and security conditions emerged as decisive determinants of institutional trajectories. A mentor described how political transitions stalled progress: “In practice, there wasn’t much progress for most of the period, largely because a change in government required them to rebuild relationships with key government partners [...] nothing could move forward until relationships were re-established. It illustrates how project timelines often clash with reality." With another institution, insecurity caused operational paralysis: “Security issues also caused disruptions. Banks closed, universities closed, making it impossible to operate normally. Some training requiring international trainers had to be postponed." These shocks forced institutions into adaptive survival modes, rather than project implementation.

However, respondents distinguished between limitations arising from short programme cycles, and broader ecosystem constraints related to the absence of stable core funding. At the programme level, GDN's prevailing 18–24-month funding horizon was widely viewed as insufficient to support durable institutionalisation. As one respondent from a participating institution noted, "If the project had lasted around three years, that would have been more impactful than 18 months [...] in addition, when we were asked to reduce our budget, we had to make compromises on quality, which can be problematic." These observations point to the challenges of embedding organisational reforms within compressed timeframes and constrained project budgets.

At the same time, interviewees emphasised that sustainability challenges cannot be attributed to programme design alone, rather they reflect structural weaknesses in the wider research funding ecosystem. Particularly, the lack of predictable core financing for think tanks. As the director of another institution explained, "the main difficulty for think tanks is the lack of stable funding to scrutinise issues of interest to the community on a daily basis. With more extensive funding over three, four, or five years, even if it is not a lot, when it is stable and long-term, it allows each organisation to structure itself."

The findings reveal a fundamental tension between project logic and institutional logic. While GDN-supported interventions strengthened competitiveness and short-term capacity, sustainability remained fragile in an ecosystem that prioritises short-term projects over core institutional financing. Data from one programme illustrates this vulnerability. As one mentor explained, "initially, the faculty allowed the dean's secretary to support the laboratory, but that person later moved to another role and was not replaced." These accounts suggest that institutionalisation is an incremental trajectory, rather than an endpoint and that gains risk erosion without sequenced support, or the absorption of recurrent costs into permanent budgets.

A secondary sustainability risk emerged among higher-performing institutions: agenda dilution driven by donor demand. A mentor cautioned that success can generate new vulnerabilities: "This sometimes happens with successful think tanks: they become so sought after by donors that they lose their own strategic direction [as they are] pulled in too many directions." In ecosystems where donors cluster around preferred themes, institutions may face pressure to compromise locally grounded research agendas in order to maintain financial solvency.

Finally, the absence of domestic investment in research remained the most binding constraint on long-term sustainability. Institutions operate in environments where public funding for research is limited or declining. A mentor noted, "the research ecosystem in this country, like many others, lacks stable funding [...], recruitment of researchers is not keeping pace with the increase in student numbers [...], this is a more general problem of

the growth crisis in West African universities." Another institution similarly observed that “the work is necessary, but the states do not have the resources to support them."

In other words, sustainability beyond the programme remains constrained not by institutional capability alone, but by ecosystem conditions characterised by political volatility, short funding cycles, and weak domestic investment in research. Interviewees emphasised that preserving programme gains will require a shift away from isolated project support and toward longer-term, sequenced, institutional financing that reflects the realities of fragile research environments.

Finding 16: Investments stimulated latent demand for evidence, but this demand remains fragile and largely non-institutionalized.

Across all programmes, increased visibility of nationally produced research primarily functioned as a legitimising mechanism: strengthening recognition of local expertise and credibility. Interviewees consistently described improved acknowledgement of the quality and relevance of locally generated research. As one respondent observed, “there is a recognition of the validity of the study[...] the data produced[...] and of its ultimate relevance.” However, this recognition did not automatically convert into sustained demand: “The programme created interest, curiosity, and discussion, but it did not yet create a habit of using evidence.”

By systematically documenting national research capacity and constraints, the programme challenged prevailing assumptions held by both policymakers and external partners that credible evidence must originate outside the country. A mentor described this shift clearly: “Before, there was an idea that expertise had to come from outside. The programme helped show that there is national expertise that can produce serious evidence.” This change in perception had practical implications, even where immediate demand remained uneven. In one country, a respondent noted that “working with GDN placed us on the global map [...] nationally.” Similarly, another interviewee observed that “the researchers that do the programme get recognized [...] and get invited [to participate in dialogue] by policy actors [in the country].”

Interviews reinforce this pattern. Think tanks reported that enhanced visibility enabled them to be recognised as legitimate contributors to national debates, even in politically constrained contexts. As one respondent explained, “one of our objectives was to increase the visibility of our work among public actors, so that they could refer to it in order to advance their public agenda.” In practice, this visibility translated into inclusion in dialogue, rather than immediate systematic uptake. Another respondent clarified that “when a national debate arises, not all structures are able to put forward arguments or mobilise knowledge to get them accepted. This is a huge challenge, but one that we have [now] been able to meet.” Thus, the emphasis was primarily on being heard and recognised, and not yet on embedding evidence into decision-making routines.

Interviews nevertheless confirm that demand for evidence at the national level largely remained latent, rather than institutionalised. National actors were explicit about this gap between discussion and action. As one national leader acknowledged, “we discussed the results, but discussion does not automatically lead to decisions or requests for further studies.” In one country, expectations remained cautious: “It is still early to say whether they have already been useful.” In another, the limits were described more directly: “We are not yet at the stage of data use.” In these contexts, demand emerged initially through debate and reflection, rather than commissioning or routine uptake, leaving it fragile and episodic. This fragility was explicitly recognised by one interviewee, saying “researchers still need to be convinced of the reform.”

Across interviews, respondents emphasised that national demand for evidence lagged behind improvements on the supply side. As one respondent explained, “once the launch was over, there was no real mechanism to maintain momentum around the findings.” Another highlighted the dependence on individual actors, rather than institutional processes: “Interest depends a lot on individuals. If the person in the ministry changes, the discussion can stop.” While participation in national research systems under GDN expanded deliberative space and strengthened legitimacy, the absence of institutionalised mechanisms for commissioning, dialogue, or translation limited the extent to which demand could convert into sustained evidence use. As one respondent reflected, “we now know more about our research system than before, but knowing does not mean using.” This point was echoed by another, saying “the supply side is improving faster than the demand side.”

Interviews therefore reinforce the need for structured and national-level engagement (alongside deliberate sequencing with longer-term policy, funding, and coordination instruments), if demand for evidence is to become durable. As one respondent concluded, “a diagnostic alone is not enough. Without a second phase, the effects remain limited.” Another emphasised the importance of sustained accompaniment: “What would make the difference is continuity: follow-up, accompaniment, and time.”

In other words, increased visibility primarily enhanced the legitimacy, credibility, and recognisability of nationally produced research. While these gains expanded deliberative space and enabled engagement with policy actors, they did not on their own generate sustained or institutionalised evidence use. Without structured post-diagnostic engagement, commissioning mechanisms, or deliberate sequencing with policy and funding instruments, demand for evidence remained fragile and episodic.

One additional mechanism through which visibility translated into coordination was institutional structuring within universities. Interviews demonstrate that institutional structuring itself functioned as a coordination mechanism, particularly within universities. One mentor explained that prior to the programme, “there were separate research teams.” The creation of a unified laboratory thus provided a shared identity that enabled

coordination across disciplines and actors. As the mentor further noted, “moving from separate teams to a laboratory structure has encouraged multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary exchanges.” This institutional visibility also enabled external engagement, including “scientific days to mark the laboratory’s launch and a roundtable with former ministers and one current minister.” This signals early recognition.

Evaluation Question:
Did individual-level capacity translate into institutional performance improvements?

Finding 17: Individual capacity gains translated into improved institutional research quality and practices.

Individual-level research capacity gains contributed meaningfully to improvements in institutional research quality, coordination, and delivery. However, the translation of these gains was strongly mediated by organisational context. Where institutions were able to absorb and leverage strengthened individual skills, improvements extended beyond personal productivity and into collective performance. Where such structures were weak, gains remained person-dependent and created fragility if key individuals exited.

A central outcome of the programme was the emergence of individual researchers into roles that strengthened institutional execution capacity. For many participants, this marked a shift from academic contribution, to programme management. One project coordinator described this transition: “For me personally, it was a key capacity-building experience because it was the first major research programme I had led. [...] The mentoring helped me understand donors’ administrative, financial, and monitoring requirements." This illustrates how individual learning became organisationally consequential, enabling institutions to operationalise complex programmes and present professionalised scientific agendas to external audiences.

Individual capacity gains also diffused within institutions as trained researchers became mentors, advisors, and reference points for peers. As one respondent noted, “Four researchers received grants [...] their work was presented within the laboratory, which helped other doctoral students understand how research can lead to funding opportunities." Fellows introduced higher standards for research design, documentation, and execution through everyday practice. In the one laboratory, these skills translated into external mobility and recognition: “They developed skills in writing research proposals and applying for funding [...] which led to several mobility opportunities abroad." In this way, individual productivity generated institutional-level benefits, by temporarily filling

structural gaps with skilled individuals. Functioning, as one respondent described, as “de facto institutional assets."

However, the findings also reveal risks in sustaining individual-to-institutional translation. When gains were not embedded in formal roles or routines, progress remained vulnerable to turnover. Mentors expressed concern that advances were tied to people, rather than systems: “A major fragility I saw was the difficulty of sustaining a human resource dedicated to project follow-up. I was concerned that the system might collapse once the project ended." Similar to individual-level findings, others warned that training without application limits impact. As one mentor noted, “training does not equal application. Researchers need opportunities to practice what they learned [...] More internal rotation or internal training led by those who already received the training would ensure continuity." In some cases, rigid hierarchies also constrained diffusion. One mentor observed that “the institution’s functioning seemed very centralised around a few strong personalities, with limited decision-making power in other teams [...] decisions usually ended up being made by one or two people."

Overall, the GDN programme demonstrates that individual capacity building can generate institutional-level improvements when researchers assume leadership roles and share skills through practice. Yet these gains remain uneven and fragile when dependent upon “entrepreneurial researchers,” rather than embedded systems.

At the same time, interviews suggest that it is important to situate these dynamics within realistic expectations of what internationally funded programmes can achieve. External interventions can strengthen skills, open networks, and catalyse institutional change, but the deeper institutionalisation of research practices ultimately depends on organisational incentives, leadership, and domestic funding environments that lie largely beyond the control of donor-funded programmes. In this sense, GDN’s interventions contributed important enabling conditions for institutional strengthening, even where they could not directly guarantee sustained organisational transformation.

Respondents therefore emphasised that longer-term sustainability depends on gradually moving beyond project-based reliance on individuals and toward stronger institutional anchoring, ensuring that individual skills are absorbed into collective laboratory identities, organisational routines, and internal systems. International programmes can help catalyse this process by strengthening researchers and exposing institutions to new practices, but the consolidation of these gains ultimately depends on the internal evolution of institutions and the broader research system in which they operate.

Finding 18: Institutional performance gains depended on absorptive capacity and leadership.

Data from two programmes demonstrates that institutional performance gains were shaped less by the presence of individual skill and more by leadership quality and organisational absorptive capacity. Institutions progressed when leadership was proactive, politically astute, and able to decentralise authority. On the contrary, where leadership was weak or overly centralised, projects stalled and gains remained fragile. Leadership thus emerged as the primary mechanism for navigating administrative complexity and internal politics within universities.

Mentors repeatedly emphasised leadership as decisive. At one university, a mentor observed: “Leadership was critical. The laboratory director navigated political disruptions, strikes, and internal challenges skillfully, while keeping a clear view of necessary institutional reforms." This assessment was echoed internally: “The former faculty director strongly believed in the project and supported it at all levels.” Such leadership enabled what respondents described as a “significant institutional breakthrough,” notably the consolidation of law, economics, and management into a single multidisciplinary laboratory. These examples indicate that leadership extended beyond technical coordination, into strategic negotiation within rigid institutional environments.

Conversely, insufficient leadership hindered progress. A mentor noted early inertia: “I would also say that [the director’s] predecessor wasn’t very proactive in getting things to a good point, which added to the challenge." In other cases, leadership capacity evolved during implementation. At one university, a mentor described a shift in management style: “Initially, he acted like a professor delegating work to students. Over time [...] he shifted toward a project leader role [...] and the work became more decentralised, and team members took on more responsibility." The mentor then concluded, “what stands out most is the collective ownership of the project [...] the university truly took part." These trajectories suggest that absorptive capacity can be learned, but only when leadership adapts its role.

Absorptive capacity depended on moving from individualised research practices toward collective institutional missions. One institution attributed success to internal cohesion: “The most important change was the ability to build a cohesive team with a shared vision. This sense of collective purpose is what will sustain progress." Another interviewee similarly noted that “the focus is [now] more on a collective than on an individual and therefore the possibility of having something that lasts when people move on." Where this cohesion was absent, individual skills failed to translate into institutional outcomes. One mentor explained that despite technical competence, implementation faltered: “But she [the communications lead] could not implement everything alone. She needed the whole team to send content [...] This was not her fault, it was the lack of collective engagement." In other cases, turnover undermined continuity: “The position was tied to the project. After one year, she moved to another research laboratory that offered better

conditions." Several respondents noted that momentum slowed without key figures: “When the coordinator was not present, things slowed down."

Institutions with higher absorptive capacity leveraged leadership to consolidate legitimacy and external engagement. One laboratory used the programme to formalise internal organisation, stating: “We improved governance and organisation within the laboratory. We now have clear research axes, defined responsibilities, internal regulations, a strategic plan, a logo, and a website." As a result, the laboratory is now recognised as “one of the flagship units of the doctoral school." These outcomes reflect leadership’s role in translating dispersed skills into institutional coherence and visibility.

Proactive leadership also enabled institutions to convert research quality into policy influence. One institution’s leadership used research on decentralisation in order to strengthen engagement with the state: “The report helped to inform national debates on the future of decentralisation and, in turn, strengthened our institutional anchoring with these actors." Similarly, a newly established think tank used programme-supported communication capacity to distinguish itself institutionally: “I think these two training courses helped us a lot [...] it helped us with many partners because they could see that we already existed, that we had our website, etc.” These cases demonstrate that institutional performance gains materialised when leadership deliberately mobilised individual skills in order to position the institution more strategically.

Despite these advances, respondents framed progress as gradual. As one interviewee noted, change was “incremental, rather than transformative." While the programme strengthened practices and roles, it “did not fundamentally alter institutional mandates, funding structures, or staffing models." Institutions continue to operate within rigid legal and administrative frameworks beyond the programme’s influence. Respondents therefore emphasised that sustaining gains will require moving beyond project-based logic, toward embedding individual capacity into “durable systems, roles, or routines."

6.3 National Research System Level Findings

This section assesses national-level research capacity strengthening: examining how GDN’s programme contributed to changes in national research systems, coordination, and evidence use. The analysis focuses on whether GDN-supported processes influenced policy dialogue, strengthened national coordination and visibility of research, and stimulated local demand for evidence across the countries where the programme operated. Drawing on in-depth interviews with national leads, mentors, institutional and think-tank actors, and programme management, the section examines how national-level effects emerged through cognitive, relational, and normative shifts, and the extent to which these changes began to translate into more formalised policy engagement, coordination mechanisms, and funding decisions. The analysis also considers how

national-level outcomes interacted with individual- and institutional-level interventions, recognising that system-level research capacity strengthening often evolves incrementally and informally, before being embedded in official structures or processes.

Evaluation Question:
Did GDN influence the "rules of the game" for research?

Finding 19: National-level research capacity strengthening influenced policy debates by changing how research systems are understood, not by directly driving reform.

The influence of national-level research capacity strengthening on policy debates was primarily cognitive and discursive, rather than instrumental. Instead of directly triggering policy reform or adoption of recommendations, GDN's programmes reshaped how national research systems were understood and discussed: by reframing them as systems, rather than collections of isolated problems. This shift in the unit of analysis from individual institutions, funding gaps, or output deficits and toward interconnected ecosystems with identifiable bottlenecks and incentives, constitutes a substantive national-level research capacity strengthening outcome. This effect is most clearly articulated through interviews, indicating similar cognitive and discursive shifts occurred through institutional strengthening and research production (even in the absence of formal national diagnostics). Evidence for this finding comes from both the DRA and Savoirs Sahel programmes: although they work through different mechanisms, both shaped how research systems are understood and debated at the national level. Throughout all programmes, influence operated by repositioning research institutions as legitimate actors in policy debate, rather than by directly driving reform.

While political and administrative constraints often limited immediate action, this systemic framing created a more credible foundation for policy reflection and dialogue. As one respondent put it, "the methodology was highly relevant to the contexts I supported, where national research systems remain poorly documented and fragmented. It offered a rigorous, flexible, and analytical framework suited to capturing the real complexity of the scientific landscape." From an evaluative perspective, the absence of direct policy uptake should therefore not be interpreted as limited impact. Instead, the programme performed a necessary groundwork function by establishing shared understanding and legitimising evidence-based discussion, especially in contexts where reform windows are episodic and politically contingent.

Interviews demonstrate that the programme transformed national policy debates by shifting discussions from fragmented and anecdotal problem-listing, toward systemic

reasoning about research ecosystems. As one interviewee reflected, “before the methodology was implemented, the state of the social science research system was not well known [...] the system, in terms of the research cycle, was poorly understood.” In one context, the programme was credited with providing diagnostic clarity that policymakers lacked: “Before decision-makers can respond, a contextual study is needed to show the issues [...] once we identified what was blocking the research environment, we could outline the solutions the government could explore.”

Data reveals how strengthened institutions were able to sustain and reframe national debates, even in politically constrained environments. As one think tank explained, “in the case of this project, the context was not entirely favourable to debate on decentralisation issues. Thanks to this project, we were able to keep the debate going by initiating multi-stakeholder dialogues, which ultimately led to the organisation of a national conference on decentralisation at the state level.” This reflects the pathway typical of the Savoirs Sahel programme, wherein grants to think tanks strengthened their ability to convene policy dialogue and sustain debate on national policy issues.

Rather than producing immediate policy reform, this contribution lay in maintaining deliberative space and re-legitimising evidence-based discussion. As another respondent clarified, “for us, influencing public policy means carefully analysing a situation, gathering facts and data, analysing them to produce knowledge, and making recommendations so that the authorities can act accordingly.” This mirrors the programme’s pathway of influence, by foregrounding problem framing and debate (rather than direct policy uptake).

Across all countries, the programme was described as the first systematic and explicit national-level assessment of the social science research system. While research activity existed prior, the system itself (its actors, flows, bottlenecks, and incentives) was rarely understood or debated as a coherent whole. In one country, “available data was scattered and often outdated [...] [the programme] provided an updated view, at least for 2023–2024.” In another country, interviewees emphasised the value of this system-wide lens: “The added value of the programme is that it successfully captured the full ecosystem of social science research in its country’s context, across all its components.” Another respondent reflected that “there are countries in which this evidence is not available. I suspect that the local ministries have very little, if any, data on their own research system at all.” In one country, respondents confirmed that, “there is [now] a recognition of the validity of the study, of the validity of the data produced, of the seriousness of the work done, and of its ultimate relevance [...] not for GDN, not for the team that did it, but for [the country].” These findings indicate that at the national level, the programme thus functioned as a diagnostic public good, producing baseline knowledge that had not previously existed in a consolidated, policy-relevant, format. This

contribution is particularly visible in the DRA programme, which produces national research system assessments and datasets that were previously unavailable.

Several interviewees emphasised that the primary shift was not reform adoption, but recognition of research as valid and relevant to national concerns. Examples of this shift appear both in DRA contexts and in Savoirs Sahel-supported think tank engagement. One institution in the Savoirs Sahel program noted that, following programme engagement, “we strengthened our credibility with the government through our ability to maintain dialogue on decentralisation, even though the government's priorities were not, at one point, focused on this public policy issue.”

Another respondent in the Savoirs Sahel program described how this legitimacy repositioned think tanks within national debates: “Thanks to the programme's actions, we were able to demonstrate to all decentralisation stakeholders that think tanks and researchers have an important role to play in this process, even though they had been neglected for a long time.” Such experiences illustrate how think tank grants can contribute to system-level research capacity strengthening by strengthening the credibility and policy engagement capacity of research organisations. The outcome was a shift in how research systems were perceived, rather than immediate institutional reform.

One interviewee captured the outcomes clearly: “The added value was to move beyond analysing outputs, such as publications or the number of researchers, and beyond inputs such as infrastructure, to focus on what lies in between: processes, laboratory culture, relationships between researchers, collaboration dynamics, and the practical realities of research work.” Further, another respondent stated that the programme initiated a process, “where the government is interested in debating the report, not just being present and praising the report, but actually debating [its findings related to policy change].” One respondent pointed out that, following the programme, “there is clearly demand for post-dissemination engagement.” Thus, the principal policy influence lay in changing policy awareness, rather than producing immediate reform.

Interviewees described a qualitative shift from fragmented or anecdotal discussion, toward system-level reasoning, as the programme legitimised evidence-based reflection on how national research systems function. As one respondent described, “what changed was the awareness it generated. The research system is highly fragmented, and the available data is either very limited or scattered. The programme identified several specific gaps presented by different actors. It provided a shared language to structure a reform perspective and think about change.”

Beyond diagnosis, the programme influenced policy debates by opening structured spaces for reflection, rather than enforcing recommendations. This was a mode of influence that interviewees described as both deliberate and contextually appropriate. In

one country, political interest was visible at the launch stage: “In his opening speech, the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research committed to using these data to improve the research system.” In another country, the programme intersected with ongoing reform processes. One respondent explained that the National Director of Scientific Research was directly involved in the national policy reform process, noting that “The National Director of Scientific Research was part of the [DRA] team [...] in the same period, the national research policy was validated and the Research and Innovation Agency was created.” In another, the programme was explicitly situated within a broader reform moment: “We are in a phase of reflection on the reform [...] I really hope that they will take advantage of the study to incorporate recommendations.” As noted by GDN programme staff, this indirect mode of influence was intentional and contextually appropriate: “Our objective is not to have the ministry follow recommendations [...] what we focus on is levers of change.”

Data similarly indicates that influence occurred through structured engagement and visibility, rather than direct reform leverage. One mentor described how research outputs created opportunities for dialogue, noting that “during the study presentation, political representatives were present. That alone is a form of influence.” However, they also emphasised that “the study was descriptive with normative recommendations, so it is too early to expect measurable impact,” reinforcing the finding that influence was discursive rather than instrumental.

At the institutional level, the programme strengthened the conditions for future engagement by making research more visible and legible to public actors. As one institution explained, “when a national debate arises, not all structures are able to put forward arguments or mobilise knowledge and get them accepted. This is a huge challenge, but one that we have been able to meet.” This echoes the function of enabling credible participation in debate, rather than triggering immediate reform.

Data from all programmes indicates that GDN reshaped national policy debates primarily by changing how research systems are understood, recognised, and discussed, rather than by directly driving reform. Across programmes, influence operated through system legibility, discursive legitimacy, and the creation of structured spaces for reflection. While these processes rarely translated into immediate policy decisions, they established the cognitive, relational, and evidentiary foundations required for future reform. This was particularly evident in contexts where policy change is episodic, politically contingent, and rarely linear.

Finding 20: Mentorship emerged as a critical national-level enabler, particularly in navigating political access, trust, and data constraints.

National-level research capacity strengthening outcomes under this finding demonstrate that mentorship functioned as a critical systems-bridging mechanism, enabling research engagement in contexts wherein institutional authority, trust, or access to data and policymakers was constrained. As one mentor explained, “I was asked to provide independent support throughout the contract period [...] to support adaptation to the national context and facilitate stakeholder engagement strategies.”

Interviews showed that mentorship did not operate primarily as a technical support function, but rather as an enabling mechanism that altered how national research systems could be navigated in practice. One respondent from GDN articulated this distinction clearly: “Mentors, for us, are critical because basically we know that when you are the person giving the money, then that kind of relationship is tainted by this power imbalance [...] Mentors are almost a technology of project management. They are a third party that allows information to circulate.” By occupying a position outside both the donor-grantee relationship, as well as formal institutional hierarchies, mentors were able to mitigate power imbalances and enable political access, trust-building, and administrative authorisations (that research teams alone could not secure).

Data likewise illustrates how mentorship enabled teams to navigate fragile political contexts where formal channels were insufficient. In this context, mentorship focused less on deliverables than on sustaining engagement, with the mentor noting “that takes time, and it is central to any chance of success.”

Across interviews, mentors were repeatedly described as boundary spanners: leveraging personal credibility, relationships, and contextual knowledge in order to unlock engagement with government actors and data holders. One respondent from GDN provided a concrete illustration: “There was a moment of crisis when the team could not access the data the ministry promised us and never delivered. The mentor, who knows everyone, made a few phone calls and then something happened.” This brokerage role was particularly visible where formal institutional channels proved insufficient, as well as where research teams lacked the standing or legitimacy to intervene directly. Similarly, a mentor reflecting on their work noted that “where there were complex procedures for releasing research funds, I facilitated exchanges between GDN and the national team, leading to government authorization to endorse the funds.” These examples demonstrate that mentorship enabled navigation of informal access pathways and trust relationships, which strongly shaped whether national-level research could proceed.

Mentorship was particularly critical in fragile or politically sensitive contexts, where formal authority alone was insufficient to sustain research processes. One respondent noted the importance of sustained mentor engagement during periods of delay and uncertainty: “I increased team motivation and ensured almost daily follow-up with the principal investigator to recover from delays.” Another interviewee emphasised that effectiveness

derived not from conventional mentoring alone, but from contextual knowledge: “the relationship was effective not in the classical sense of mentorship, but because the mentor knew the system and could intervene when access was blocked.”

National research capacity is not determined solely by formal institutions, policies, or technical competence. It is also shaped by the ability to access decision-makers, negotiate administrative barriers, and secure cooperation from data-holding authorities: capacities that mentors actively helped to provide. By enabling teams to engage across these relational and political interfaces, mentorship operated as a high-leverage, national, research capacity strengthening pathway, linking individual and institutional capacity to system-level engagement. As one respondent described, “we really encouraged the teams to use all of these interactions to build excitement and a demand for the results of the study [...] We spoke to the director general for scientific research, then rectors of universities, senior researchers, and others.”

Overall, interview data revealed that mentors played a critical (but under-theorised) role in national-level research capacity strengthening. Their contribution extended beyond technical advice, to include political brokerage, trust mediation, and administrative problem-solving. These are all functions that proved decisive in enabling national research engagement in complex and constrained environments.

Finding 21: National-level outcomes varied significantly by country context, indicating the need for differentiated systems strategies.

Interviews across all programmes demonstrates that national-level research capacity strengthening outcomes varied significantly by country context, underscoring the need for differentiated systems strategies rather than uniform expectations. Programme leadership summarised the divergence clearly, noting that “some countries are ahead, some are a couple of steps behind, and others are further back.” This variation was explicitly linked to governance maturity, with the observation that “countries that have functioning ministries should be treated differently.”

Diagnostics did not operate on a neutral institutional landscape. Instead, outcomes were shaped by political openness, coordination capacity, and the absorptive capacity of research and policy systems. In more mature contexts, diagnostics translated into reflective dialogue and alignment. As one respondent explained, “we are in a phase of reflection on reform [...] there is a real openness to discussing how the system functions and what needs to change.” In these settings, the programme contributed to system-wide conversations, rather than fragmented or adversarial engagement. Data from one programme which experienced political disruption and institutional fragility reinforces this pattern, highlighting how identical programme inputs can be constrained, or yield very different outcomes, depending on political stability and continuity.

In lower-capacity contexts, programmes produced more fragmented effects. One interviewee observed that "the system is still very fragile. There is not yet a real culture of coordination between research actors and public authorities." Similarly, respondents emphasised that unfavourable political contexts limited immediate policy engagement, even where research quality and relevance were strong. As one think tank explained, "the context was not entirely favourable to debate on decentralisation issues," requiring sustained effort simply to "keep the debate going." These differences matter because national research capacity is not a single variable, but a system-wide property that determines whether data can be absorbed, debated, and acted upon within policy and institutional processes.

Data further underscores that national outcomes were strongly shaped by institutional starting points. One mentor noted that before the programme there was "no laboratory. There were separate research teams," and that "institutional evolution is slow because of rigid legal and administrative frameworks. Without legal reform, some changes are simply not possible." In this context, the process of national level research capacity strengthening took the form of institutional structuring and visibility, rather than immediate policy influence. As the mentor explained, "the immediate question was whether the laboratory had been officially established by the end of the project. The longer-term question is whether the laboratory continues to exist and function after the project."

Interviews further suggest that national-level research capacity strengthening outcomes were most effective where individual- and institutional-level research capacity strengthening investments already existed**.** In one country, "there was already a dynamic of dialogue between researchers and policymakers, and [the programme] reinforced this by providing shared evidence." Similarly, "the [programme] helped strengthen arguments that we were already making about the need to invest more in social science research." In these cases, the programme translated existing skills, relationships, and reforms into nationally legible evidence that could support ongoing advocacy and coordination. Where research capacity strengthening under GDN operated in isolation (without parallel individual or institutional capacity), system-level effects were weaker and more difficult to sustain.

Interviewees across two programmes also noted that diagnostics and institutional strengthening did not immediately generate formal demand for research evidence at the national level. Rather than producing direct policy uptake, the programme primarily catalysed conversations about the research system itself – its constraints, governance, and the conditions required for evidence use. In contexts where funding for social science research is already limited, respondents emphasised that funding to study the research system is even rarer, making externally supported diagnostics an important catalytic intervention. As one respondent stated, "what we wanted was evidence-based debate, not just politics." In one country, while the programme opened space for national

discussion, respondents were clear about the limits of episodic engagement: “Once [the programme] finishes, we don’t usually have funding [...] to keep the conversation alive.” These findings suggest that the programmes functioned primarily as a catalyst for reflection and debate on national research systems, rather than as a direct driver of institutionalised evidence demand. They also underscore a structural challenge: without continued resources or institutional ownership, diagnostic and dialogue-oriented interventions can struggle to sustain the conversations they initiate, even when they successfully surface critical system-level issues.

Collectively, the data indicates that national research capacity is a system property that is shaped by governance maturity, political stability, and existing institutional capacity. While programmes successfully initiated reflection, dialogue, and institutional structuring, sustained system-level change depended upon continued engagement and appropriate sequencing. Overall, the findings underscore the need for differentiated national-systems strategies which align with country context, rather than adopting uniform pathways to national-level research capacity strengthening in donor-funded programmes.

Evaluation Question:
Did the programme strengthen national research coordination, incentives and policy linkages?

Finding 22: National-level research capacity strengthening improved the coordination and visibility of social science research through reputational and relational mechanisms.

Across all programmes, improvements in national coordination and visibility were generated primarily through reputational, relational, and cognitive mechanisms, rather than through the creation of new (formal) coordination bodies. By mapping actors, convening consultations, and strengthening institutional identities, these interventions lowered barriers to interaction and enabled research actors to recognise themselves as part of a shared national research system. As one respondent explained, “we broke down actors and clarified their interactions within the research environment.” This shift was similarly described as a move toward system legibility: “Before, the landscape was unclear and fragmented, [the programme] provided a baseline that can be used for future comparison.”

Similar coordination effects emerged through networking and dialogue, even in the absence of formal system mapping. One respondent described how programme-supported research enabled sustained engagement across previously disconnected actors: “Thanks to this project, we were able to keep the debate going by

initiating multi-stakeholder dialogues, which ultimately led to the organisation of a national conference on decentralisation at the state level."[6] This role positioned the think tank as a facilitator of coordination, with the respondent noting that "we subsequently became a facilitator of multi-stakeholder dialogue, acting as a link between the grassroots population, CSOs, and researchers, all connected to the government."

This recognition effect is particularly significant in research environments wherein actors operate in isolation, and with a lack of shared understanding on how the system functions. Interviews demonstrate that national-level research capacity strengthening improved the visibility and legibility of national research ecosystems. Through system mapping and consultation processes, previously opaque structures became clearer: clarifying who produces research, how it is funded, and how actors interact. In one country, this clarity was directly linked to improved coordination and strategic orientation: "The programme responds to the needs of our national research system by providing data and mechanisms to guide funding and strategic orientation." In this way, national-level research systems became intelligible to both internal actors and external stakeholders.

Respondents further emphasised that regional networking strengthened coordination beyond national boundaries. One think tank noted that "bringing together think tanks from different countries [...] connected us to each other." Another reflected that "it is thanks to this programme that everyone has been able to understand that there is experience to be shared, practices to be shared, and the possibility of envisaging joint actions." These exchanges reinforced the programme's intended collaboration dynamic by enabling participants to recognise common challenges and opportunities across contexts.

As a result, respondents reported that regional engagement also strengthened institutional visibility within the sub-region. As one respondent noted, the exchanges "increased our visibility." These relational effects created early (but credible) pathways for coordination and collaboration, even where institutional environments remained fragile.

The programme also generated strong reputational effects for national research teams, repositioning them as legitimate interlocutors for policy actors. In one country, participation in the programme facilitated first-time engagement with the government. At a systems level, this visibility functioned as an intentional platform for repositioning research teams as credible producers and interpreters of evidence in national policy debates.

The programme also played a critical role in re-legitimising social sciences at the national level, which were often marginalised relative to applied or technical disciplines. In one country, it marked a departure from past practice: "Up to now, the focus has mainly been

[6] As stated in the opening to this section, the analysis considers how national-level outcomes interacted with individual- and institutional-level interventions, recognising that system-level research capacity strengthening often evolves incrementally and informally, before being embedded in official structures or processes.

on applied sciences [...] but for social sciences, this is a first." In another, this objective was explicit: "The primary expectation was to deconstruct how stakeholders perceive the social sciences and generate interest in valuing them more seriously." Interviewees observed that "the programme opened a national debate on the legitimacy and role of social sciences." Analytically, the programme therefore functioned not only to provide technical diagnostics, but to regulate interventions: fundamentally reshaping how social science research was perceived and valued within national systems.

National coordination improved primarily through these relational and reputational mechanisms, rather than through the creation of new formal coordination bodies. National-level research capacity strengthening investments made research systems legible and repositioned research actors as credible participants in country-level dialogue. In one country, this took the form of tools to guide funding and strategic orientation. In another, actor mapping was highlighted as essential for coordination and in another, the programme increased visibility among both ministry officials and leaders of higher education and research institutions.

6.4 Global Research Ecosystem Level Findings

This section assesses how GDN's Francophone Africa programme contributed to research capacity strengthening at the external, research environment, and global partnership levels. It likewise examines how the programme supported the positioning of Francophone African researchers and institutions within both global and sub-regional research networks, as well as how it influenced donor practices, global research norms, and debates on localization, equitable partnerships, and the role of intermediaries in global research systems. Drawing on interviews with donors, multilateral actors, programme leadership, mentors, and partner organisations, the analysis reflects both external perceptions and lived experiences in order to assess and benchmark GDN's added value, constraints, and role within the global research capacity strengthening ecosystem.

Evaluation Question:
Did GDN's initiative improve Francophone Africa's visibility and influence in global research?

Finding 23: GDN played a structural brokerage role that repositioned Francophone African researchers and institutions within global research networks.

GDN's brokerage function at the global level operated primarily as a structural access intervention, rather than as a visibility or dissemination exercise. Respondents described GDN as enabling Francophone African researchers and institutions (historically under-represented in global research funding and knowledge circuits) to gain, as one respondent noted, "visibility, legitimacy, and access within international research networks."

Several donors highlighted that this role addressed a long-standing geographic and linguistic imbalance in global research systems. As one interviewee noted, "we managed to build research programs, particularly in French-speaking Africa, which was a region where the GDN was much less present." This intervention operated across multiple, complementary levels. One respondent explained that GDN worked "through a large capacity-building programme for young researchers and capacity strengthening for five major institutions, and therefore also for networks." In this way, GDN helped shape not only who could participate in international research spaces, but also the institutional conditions that enabled sustained participation, including strengthened research organisations, expanded professional networks, and improved capacity to engage with international funding and collaboration opportunities.

The brokerage role was framed as systemic, rather than individualised. As one respondent emphasised, "countries must be able to think about their own development through their own research [...] it is important to work not only at the level of individuals, but also at the level of institutions and systems." This reinforces the finding that GDN's contribution lay in creating durable entry points into research networks, rather than short-term exposure or one-off opportunities.

This role was experienced concretely through structured networking mechanisms, particularly Evidence Fairs and cross-country convenings. Think tanks described tangible effects, noting that one programme increased their "visibility internationally [...] connecting us to each other, which increased our recognition." Similar effects were reported by other grantees: "Today, our organization is known not only in our country, but across the subregion." Evidence Fairs were repeatedly cited as a critical mechanism for global positioning; as one respondent explained, "the Evidence Fair allowed us to make ourselves known beyond our borders and expand our address book."

Respondents also pointed to sustained changes in GDN's presence and positioning in Francophone Africa. One interviewee observed that "GDN is starting to be well established in Francophone Africa [...] compared with five years ago, they have a solid footing in Africa." Programme leadership confirmed that this visibility was intentional rather than incidental: "The objective was to bring more visibility to these different think tanks [...] positioning them within a broader ecosystem of research and public policy."

Donors further underscored the structural nature of access, particularly in Francophone Africa, describing it as "a space where these issues are concentrated and amplified [...] and where international funding often does not reach smaller or less visible actors." One respondent highlighted GDN's role in lowering institutional barriers, noting that "they absorb the administrative burden of donor funding so that institutions that would not otherwise be able to access these channels can do so."

GDN combined international credibility with the deliberate design of networking infrastructure, in order to enable Francophone African researchers and institutions to enter and remain within global and sub-regional research networks. As one respondent summarised, "this is where their intermediary role is very powerful and essential." This contribution was systemic, rather than symbolic, embedding actors in durable relationships and enhancing their capacity to convene and lead within regional and global research ecosystems.

Finding 24: GlobalDev functioned as a complementary communication platform that is increasingly strengthening the visibility and policy reach of GDN-supported research.

The data indicates that GlobalDev operates as a complementary layer within GDN's broader research capacity strengthening ecosystem, with the potential to reinforce the visibility, accessibility, and policy engagement of research produced through GDN programmes. Originally established as an editorial platform with its own mandate and identity, GlobalDev historically operated separately from GDN's core capacity-strengthening initiatives. As one team member explained, "when Global Dev was created, we had a completely different logo, a completely different website. We were not really involved with GDN." This early separation meant that the platform was not initially designed as a communication backbone for programme activities, but rather as an adjacent initiative that researchers and programmes could draw upon when relevant.

Where GlobalDev intersected with GDN's Francophone Africa programming, it played a valuable role in amplifying local research and strengthening researchers' ability to communicate their research to policy audiences. The GlobalDev team described its function as providing "the editorial support researchers need to talk about policy issues, based on research, as opposed to pushing their latest paper only." This contribution aligns closely with GDN's broader brokerage objectives, particularly by supporting multilingual dissemination and short-form, policy-oriented outputs that make research more accessible to decision-makers. This role is further reinforced by an emerging pipeline linking training and publication, whereby researchers trained through GlobalDev workshops are encouraged to produce policy-oriented outputs for publication on the platform, creating a direct pathway from capacity building to dissemination.

More recently, GlobalDev has evolved beyond its initial blog-based dissemination model into a broader research communication platform, with this transition accelerating since

mid-2025. This evolution includes the expansion of structured training and workshop-based activities, as well as the development of new delivery formats, such as a dedicated workshops stream introduced in early 2026. Across multiple countries and programmes, these activities have included workshops at GDN's Knowledge Fairs in Dakar (2024) and Cotonou (2025), the Université d'Été de la Francophonie in Rabat, targeted sessions in Tunisia, and trainings at the Global Development Conference (2025). These sessions focused on practical skills such as writing policy briefs, using social media for research dissemination, blog writing, and public speaking. They reached a diverse set of participants, including doctoral students, early-career researchers, and think tank staff, and were consistently described as highly valuable, particularly in contexts where participants "had not had the opportunity to be trained on research communication." These activities highlight an important complementarity: while GDN programmes focus primarily on generating research and strengthening institutional capacity, GlobalDev supports the translation of research outputs into accessible, policy-facing communication and strengthens the ability of researchers to engage broader audiences.

At the same time, the data suggests that the complementarity between GlobalDev and GDN programmes remains in a phase of active development. Collaboration has often occurred through targeted entry points such as events, knowledge fairs, and workshops, which appear to have served as intentional first steps toward broader integration rather than yet reflecting a fully institutionalised model. As one respondent noted candidly, "so far we [only] have collaborated with [one programme] for the workshop." Similarly, another interviewee recalled, "I only got to know about [the GlobalDev] programme in 2021–22 [...] before that, I had no idea what they were doing." These perspectives reflect the relatively recent expansion of GlobalDev's role in research communication, particularly in Francophone Africa, where formal workshop programming began in 2024. The strong response to these initial activities suggests both significant demand and a solid foundation for further integration.

Importantly, discussions during the evaluation emphasised that strengthening complementarity does not primarily require expanding standalone communication activities, but rather strategically aligning GlobalDev's expertise with programme objectives. Early results suggest that current activities are beginning to form the basis of a more coherent and structured GlobalDev offer within GDN programming, particularly as efforts are underway to more systematically integrate training, editorial support, and programme engagement across delivery cycles. This direction aligns with GlobalDev's emerging strategy to embed research communication more fully within the scope and design of GDN programmes.

Overall, the data suggests that GlobalDev is well positioned to enhance GDN's programmes by strengthening research communication and amplifying the voices of researchers, particularly through editorial support, multilingual publication, and targeted

training. As this transition continues, closer alignment between research generation and communication platforms through integrated pipelines from training to publication and dissemination is likely to further enhance the policy relevance, accessibility, and global visibility of research produced through GDN's initiatives, positioning GlobalDev as an increasingly central component of GDN's research-to-policy ecosystem.

Finding 25: GDN's international status and neutrality functioned as a credibility anchor.

GDN's international status and neutrality functioned as a credibility anchor within unequal global research systems. Respondents highlighted that GDN's institutional positioning enabled it to operate credibly across donor, national, and institutional boundaries. As one interviewee noted, "their status as an international organisation allows them to have a neutrality that other institutions do not have. They are neutral between the donor and the partner." This neutrality underpinned trust in GDN's role and allowed it to function effectively at the interface between donors, national institutions, and research organisations.

It translated into practical reductions in transaction costs, particularly in relation to donor compliance and administrative requirements. Donors emphasised that working through GDN simplified engagement for all parties: "From an administrative point of view, it's much simpler for both the donor and the beneficiary to work with the GDN, than to sometimes work together and have to adapt to each other's procedures." Another respondent reinforced this point, noting that "the fact that GDN arrived with an international organisation's approach and procedures made things much easier."

The credibility associated with this intermediary role was especially significant for smaller or less-established research institutions that might otherwise face political, fiduciary, or administrative barriers to participation. In these cases, neutrality was described not as an abstract principle, but as a functional asset that enabled engagement within systems marked by power asymmetries and procedural complexity.

Interviews further underscored that GDN reduced risk for both donors and local institutions by absorbing administrative burdens and standardising processes. One interviewee confirmed this bridging function, stating that "they are a true intermediary in the sense that they [function to bridge the gap] between the donor and the partner."

Compared with other research and higher education partnership initiatives, GDN's model of neutrality and intermediary convening is a distinctive feature that gives it comparative strength in creating equitable engagement pathways for researchers and institutions. For example, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) emphasises locally led, context-relevant, research. This is supported through subject matter expertise, technical

support, and network convening that is “positioned for use” and intended to inform policy and practice. IDRC explicitly aims to build local expertise and peer learning, creating opportunities for researchers to generate and share research that supports policy and practice change. However, as a direct funder with its own institutional priorities and grant processes, IDRC typically operates in a funder-recipient relationship, rather than as an intermediary between partners and donors. By contrast, GDN’s positioning reduced administrative friction and power asymmetries, enabling smaller actors to participate in global research networks without being directly subsumed under a single donor’s agenda.

Bilateral development agencies such as the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) pursue higher education and research partnerships through structures that reflect their respective governmental and policy priorities. FCDO’s higher education framework and its joint initiatives with partners like the Royal Society often focus on building research consortia, doctoral pathways, and institutional linkages between UK and African institutions, embedding research capacity strengthening within broader geopolitical and development cooperation agendas. These models, while strong in fostering long-term consortia and infrastructure, are explicitly tied to the funder’s strategic objectives and can carry expectations of alignment with national policy priorities. Similarly, AFD’s Academia Partnerships Africa-France (PeA) programme is designed to foster long-term academic collaboration between French and African universities, co-creating degree programmes, two-way mobility, and partnerships with private sector economic actors to enhance training, innovation, and employability. While PeA is strong on institutional commitments and on connecting academic programmes to socio-economic priorities, its bilateral framing means that partner institutions are embedded within France’s own policy and development goals, rather than engaging through a neutral intermediary.

These differences matter in practice. GDN’s programmes were described by respondents as functioning because GDN did not impose a thematic lens, or prioritise donor agendas. This neutrality was repeatedly cited as a practical asset in lowering barriers for smaller, or less established, institutions to engage. By comparison, bilateral and multilateral partners such as the above often retain direct decision-making authority and agenda control within their partnerships, which shape participation dynamics and expectations. GDN’s intermediary role therefore represents not only a differentiating design feature, but a complement to the more institutionally anchored models pursued by these other funders.

Overall, the research suggests that GDN’s international status and neutrality were central to its effectiveness. By lowering transaction costs, mitigating administrative risk, and buffering power imbalances, GDN enabled forms of collaboration that would otherwise be difficult to sustain and support more equitable participation within global research systems.

Finding 26: GDN is increasingly perceived as a norm-setting actor in global research capacity strengthening debates.

Interviews indicate that donors and partners increasingly perceive GDN's model as offering transferable lessons for the wider research capacity strengthening field, particularly in relation to peer-to-peer engagement and non-hierarchical capacity strengthening in practice. Several interviewees explicitly framed GDN as a source of inspiration for donors seeking alternative approaches, with one donor stating that "we [donors] can draw inspiration from the GDN model for a non-hierarchical and contextualized capacity-building approach."

This perception was grounded in respondents' experiences of GDN's peer-to-peer ethos and organisational culture. One interviewee described how this was reflected in the composition and working style of the organisation: "They work in a peer-to-peer way. When you look at the people who make up GDN, they are former researchers or still active researchers [...] You are almost in a peer-to-peer dialogue." Another respondent emphasised that this was both intentional and embedded in GDN's identity, noting that "this posture, this international team that reflects diversity [...] contributes to a respectful and egalitarian partnership approach. It is part of GDN's DNA, its reason for being and its philosophy of action."

Beyond programme delivery, respondents described GDN's influence as normative: shaping how donors conceptualise partnership equity and the role of intermediaries like peers in global research systems. As one interviewee explained, "GDN's model [is] a non-hierarchical, context-sensitive, capacity-strengthening approach." Several donors further suggested that GDN's approach offers practical guidance for navigating persistent tensions in global research funding. As one respondent observed, "GDN has thought carefully about all these tensions [...] between donor agenda and scientific agenda, between funding institutions versus funding individuals."

This positioning led respondents to frame GDN not only as an implementer, but as a reference point for donor practice. One interviewee articulated this clearly, stating, "this is the kind of lesson that donors could learn from the GDN: knowing how to work with researchers in the South in a way that is not harmful, but rather aims to strengthen local capacities." Another respondent reinforced this perception, noting that "they already integrate good practices for working with researchers and institutions in the South."

In other words, GDN's influence is extending beyond its own programmes, to shape broader norms and expectations within global research capacity strengthening debates. Its practices and ethos are increasingly referenced as examples of how donors and intermediaries might operationalise equitable partnership principles in practice. As one respondent concluded, "GDN is one of the rare institutions that can legitimately claim a

unique positioning. They need to lean into their specificity [...] and show that they bring something others do not."

When benchmarked against comparable research capacity and higher education partnership initiatives, GDN's programmes stand out less for their scale and more for the model of engagement they operationalise. Like IDRC, GDN emphasises locally grounded research, peer learning, and the centrality of Southern researchers in defining agendas. However, while IDRC remains structurally a grant-making institution (retaining formal decision-making authority over funding priorities and instruments), GDN's approach allows it to explicitly reinforce peer-to-peer relationships in daily programme practice. Across all programmes, GDN's approach deliberately minimised hierarchy between donors, institutions, mentors, and researchers, embedding co-construction in research design and execution, agenda autonomy, and contextual responsiveness to needs on the ground as operational standards rather than downstream principles. This design choice appears to underpin GDN's growing reputation as a reference point for donors seeking practical ways to move beyond extractive or compliance-driven capacity strengthening models.

By contrast, bilateral partnership programmes such as AFD's PeA and FCDO's multi-year projects are strongly oriented toward institutionalisation within university systems over four- to five-year cycles. In comparison, GDN's programmes are weaker on guaranteed scale and institutional stability. Further, GDN's lighter modular design can limit the depth of formal institutionalisation achievable within a single grant cycle. However, this same lightness enabled GDN to operate with greater flexibility, peer-embedded arrangements, and contextual sensitivity. This directly enabled non-hierarchical engagement and peer-to-peer learning to be enacted in practice, rather than negotiated within rigid bilateral structures.

The comparison suggests that GDN's norm-setting influence lies precisely in the trade-off it makes between depth and mindset. Relative to IDRC, FCDO, and AFD, GDN is less equipped to deliver large-scale, long-term, institutional transformation anchored in formal agreements. At the same time, it is comparatively stronger in demonstrating how peer-to-peer engagement and equitable partnership can be operationalised on the ground: particularly in contexts marked by power asymmetries and fragmented research ecosystems. This helps explain why donors increasingly reference GDN not only as an implementer, but as a source of transferable practice. It is a model that informs how other actors might redesign their own programmes in order to reduce hierarchy, protect agenda autonomy, and engage Southern researchers as equal partners, rather than beneficiaries.

Finding 27: Financial precarity poses the principal risk to sustaining GDN's external-level contribution.

External-level research capacity strengthening outcomes such as legitimacy, network integration, and norm-setting, require time horizons that exceed typical project cycles. While donors, mentors, and think tanks strongly endorsed GDN's external-level contribution, they identified funding architecture as the primary constraint on sustaining this role. The most frequently cited concern was GDN's reliance on short, project-based, funding. As one donor explained, "they have very little core funding and work almost entirely project by project."

Think tanks highlighted the implications of these short timeframes for system-level change. As mentioned earlier, respondents noted that "eighteen-month programmes are a bit short [...] three-year durations would be more structuring." Mentors similarly emphasised that getting a seat at the table, especially in fragile contexts, is time-intensive: "They needed most of the period simply to build or rebuild relationships." These perspectives underscore the mismatch between project timelines and the duration required to embed legitimacy, trust, and network integration.

Several interviewees warned that sustained financial pressure could also distort GDN's intermediary identity. While GDN's external-level contribution depends on continuity and independence, short-term funding was seen as creating incentives that could undermine this positioning. As one respondent cautioned, "they could be tempted to respond to donors' demands alone." Another articulated the risk more starkly: "The risk is that they might betray this philosophy in order to get money to keep operating." The issue identified was therefore not strategic misalignment, but structural vulnerability arising from funding constraints.

At the same time, respondents pointed to pooled and regional funding mechanisms as a potential pathway to mitigate these risks. In the context of shrinking aid budgets, one foundation representative noted, "with overall ODA budgets decreasing, we need to partner more and really develop more joint strategies with other donors." Such mechanisms were seen as offering longer time horizons and shared risk, which could better support external-level research capacity strengthening functions.

However, interviewees also emphasised that pooled and regional approaches are not inherently beneficial. One respondent warned that "it has to be very well conceptualized [...] otherwise it becomes artificial." Regional and pooled platforms were viewed as viable only if they preserve clarity of purpose, local anchoring, and meaningful cross-country collaboration: all conditions seen as essential to sustaining GDN's distinctive contribution.

The principal threat to GDN's external-level impact is financial precarity, rather than conceptual weakness. Project-based financing constrains long-term system-building, advocacy, and norm-setting functions that depend on continuity and trust. Without increased core funding, longer-term frameworks, or well-designed pooled mechanisms,

GDN's ability to sustain its external-level role remains vulnerable, leaving system-level gains fragile over time.

Evaluation Question:
Did it contribute to more equitable and coherent global funding ecosystems?

Finding 28: GDN contributed to diversification of global and regional research participation rather than reinforcing elite capture.

Findings indicate that rather than reinforcing concentration among already dominant institutions, GDN expanded the pool of globally connected research actors, particularly among smaller and less visible think tanks. Interviews suggest that GDN's interventions contributed to the diversification of global research participation by creating credible sub-regional pathways into global collaboration, rather than channeling opportunities exclusively toward established elite researchers and institutions.

This effect was most clearly illustrated through post-programme collaborations among think tanks, indicating movement beyond visibility, toward joint knowledge production. As one think tank reported, "we responded as a consortium to a project funded by another organisation [...] this was only possible because we met through GDN's mechanisms." Similarly, one organization described how GDN-enabled connections translated into sustained collaboration: "We developed quite close ties with the other think tank [...] we even have a joint book project." These examples demonstrate that GDN-supported networking created early (but tangible) routes into collaborative research: a key marker of integration into wider research ecosystems. While still emergent, such collaborations signal durable entry points, rather than one-off exposure.

Donors explicitly contrasted this pattern with funding models that tend to reproduce concentration among already well-resourced institutions and researchers. One interviewee noted, "for one programme, they managed to reach think tanks we did not necessarily know, smaller ones. This is where GDN is very strong." Another donor highlighted how international research funding often reinforces dominance, observing that "we end up always financing the same big players [...] while others are never funded." Against this backdrop, GDN's approach was perceived as widening participation by connecting smaller and less visible institutions and researchers to sub-regional and global research spaces.

In other words, GDN did not simply redistribute visibility, but altered participation patterns within global and regional research systems. By enabling smaller institutions to form consortia, develop joint outputs, and access collaborative opportunities, GDN contributed

to diversifying who participates in global knowledge production. This represents a critical system-level contribution, as elite capture remains one of the primary mechanisms through which inequities in global research participation and influence are reproduced.

When benchmarked against comparable research and higher education partnership initiatives, GDN's programmes demonstrate a distinctive contribution to widening participation beyond already dominant institutions. This is particularly evident through deliberate engagement with smaller, less visible, think tanks and research organisations. While funders such as IDRC explicitly emphasise support to Southern researchers and institutions, their grant-making model still tends to privilege institutions with the administrative capacity, visibility, and proposal-writing experience required to compete successfully for international funding. Similarly, bilateral partnership programmes supported by FCDO and AFD often rely on institutional anchors (well-established universities or research centres capable of managing large, multi-year grants), which can unintentionally reproduce concentration among a relatively narrow set of already well-connected actors. In contrast, GDN's programme modalities were repeatedly described by donors and partners as actively surfacing and connecting institutions that were previously unknown or marginal, to international research networks: thereby expanding the pool of globally connected actors.

This differentiation is particularly evident in GDN's use of sub-regional networking and consortia formation as an entry point into global research spaces. Whereas programmes such as AFD's PeA prioritise depth of partnership between a limited number of universities, often centred on degree programmes, mobility schemes, and structured bilateral cooperation, GDN's approach favoured breadth and inclusion. By convening Evidence Fairs, GDN enabled smaller think tanks to encounter one another horizontally, as well as to form collaborative relationships (without first passing through elite global institutions). These sub-regional pathways contrast with FCDO- and AFD-supported models, wherein access to global research circuits is more commonly mediated through Northern partners or flagship institutions (and where smaller institutions may remain peripheral, even when formally included).

At the same time, this comparison also highlights trade-offs in GDN's diversification strategy. Relative to IDRC, FCDO, and AFD initiatives, GDN's programmes typically operated with lighter institutional anchoring, which limited the extent to which newly connected organisations could rapidly consolidate their global positioning. Bilateral programmes such as PeA, for example, are better equipped to lock in long-term institutional visibility and sustainability for participating universities, even if participation is more selective. GDN's contribution was therefore strongest in opening doors and altering participation patterns, rather than in guaranteeing durable access to long-term institutional transformation. In analytical terms, GDN reduced elite capture by broadening

the entry base of global research participation, while other initiatives tended to deepen engagement among a narrower set of already visible institutions.

The benchmarking suggests that GDN's programmes occupy a complementary niche within the global research capacity ecosystem. Compared with IDRC, FCDO, and AFD initiatives, GDN was particularly effective at identifying, legitimising, and connecting less visible institutions: thereby disrupting concentration dynamics that often characterise international research funding. However, this strength came with limitations in scale and durability, underscoring that diversification of participation and long-term institutional consolidation are often achieved through different programmatic logic. GDN's value therefore lies not in replacing large bilateral or multilateral programmes, but in correcting their participation biases, expanding who enters sub-regional and global research spaces, and demonstrating practical pathways for reducing elite capture in global knowledge production.

Finding 29: GDN operationalised localisation and equitable partnerships, rather than treating them as rhetorical commitments.

Interviews indicate that GDN translated localisation and equitable partnership principles into operational practice, rather than treating them as aspirational commitments. By preserving agenda autonomy, grounding programmes in local diagnostics, and resisting thematic imposition, GDN reduced bias commonly associated with donor-driven research funding. Across donor, mentor, and think-tank interviews, GDN was described as exemplifying an alternative model of global research partnership aligned with emerging agendas on localisation and equity.

A defining feature of this model was agenda impartiality. Donors emphasised that GDN does not impose priorities, with one respondent stating: "They do not push specific themes, lenses or angles. They fully embody the philosophy that researchers should initiate their own research questions." This approach was explicitly contrasted with dominant international funding models, which one interviewee described as distortive: "International funding creates biases [...] it pushes institutions to change their research agenda because they have no funding." In this context, GDN's refusal to impose agendas was seen as a deliberate corrective to prevailing funding dynamics.

Think tanks confirmed that this localisation principle was experienced in practice, rather than simply in rhetoric. As one institution noted, "the instrument put in place by the programme offered that, without imposing specific guidelines." Another similarly emphasised ownership over programme objectives, explaining that "everything we undertook was discussed [...] but the project objectives were ours." This autonomy was widely understood as central to building trust and credibility with external stakeholders.

As one newer think tank observed, “being visible, being accepted by partners, being recognised, having a certain credibility [...] the programme helped us with that.”

Interviewees repeatedly stressed the importance of programmes being grounded in local diagnostics, rather than donor demand. One respondent explained that “programmes are not built on the basis of donors’ demands alone, but are co-constructed and always based on [...] local needs.” This grounding was seen as essential to avoiding extractive or short-term engagement and to sustaining equitable partnerships over time. As another interviewee cautioned, “they must resist the temptation to become a kind of ‘super consultant’.”

GDN operationalised localisation through agenda neutrality, co-construction, and intermediation: enabling locally grounded institutions to engage globally on their own terms. In doing so, GDN reduced structural distortions associated with donor-driven research and demonstrated how equitable partnership principles can be embedded in programme design and delivery, rather than remaining rhetorical commitments.

6.5 Findings on Integration, Coherence, and Complementarity

Finding 30: The programme strengthened vertical coherence across individual, institutional, and national levels, acting as a system-level unifier.

Rather than operating in isolation, the programme linked individual skills development, institutional reform, and national policy dialogue: creating reinforcing synergies that amplified the impact of research capacity strengthening efforts. In one country, this integrative function was described as a process of deliberate alignment: “This co-construction approach, researchers sitting with policymakers, helped connect the supply and demand sides of research,” illustrating how it bridged gaps between research production and policy use by bringing actors into shared analytical spaces. At the national level, the programme supported evidence-based priority setting and investment decisions. In another country, national diagnostics strengthened the case for increased support to social science research, with one respondent noting that “policy orientation truly responds to the needs of social science research [...] by identifying areas that require more investment.”

The programme also raised the institutional visibility and legitimacy of research actors. In one programme, this reputational positioning extended beyond national boundaries, with respondents expressing the ambition to be “recognised as the focal team for implementing the methodology in Africa.” These examples show how the programme repositioned institutions as credible interlocutors within and beyond national research systems.

The programme also provided concrete tools for institutional management and system steering. As one respondent explained, “it [the programme] responds to the needs of our national research system by providing data and mechanisms to evaluate researcher performance and guide funding and strategic orientation.” In another country, similar system-level effects were reflected in improved access to policy actors, with one national team noting that “working with GDN placed [helped us achieve our] first direct engagement with the ministry.” Collectively, these experiences indicate that the programme strengthened coordination by making national research systems more legible to themselves and by embedding research teams more firmly within policy dialogue.

Perspectives from mentors reinforced this interpretation. One mentor described the programme as “a structured frame of reference [...] enabling identification of strengths, weaknesses, and bottlenecks,” underscoring its role in legitimising reform agendas. This framing helped to connect diagnostics to policy orientation. At the individual level, the programme also contributed to skills development, with interviewees highlighting that “we’re building the capacity of local researchers to do research on research.” Overall, GDN’s programming functioned as system-level glue: aligning individual competencies, institutional reforms, and national diagnostics within a shared analytical and policy-relevant framework.

Finding 31: Vertical synergies emerged between institutional strengthening and individual capacity gains.

The data shows that when host institutions actively engaged with individual fellows, institutional practices and individual capacity gains reinforced one another. Rather than operating as parallel or disconnected interventions, the programmes interacted dynamically, creating learning loops that strengthened supervision, quality assurance, and dissemination. One grantee described this interaction in practice: stating that “the host institution closely followed the progress of our research. Professors held review sessions at each key stage, which helped improve quality.” This illustrates how institutional engagement directly shaped the quality of individual research processes and outputs.

In several cases, individual research projects also fed back into institutional strengthening. As one respondent explained, “individual research projects became entry points for strengthening institutional processes, rather than isolated capacity gains.” This reflects a shift from viewing fellowships as stand-alone investments, toward using them as catalysts for broader institutional learning, improvement, and collaboration. As one researcher stated, “I also developed links with my mentor’s laboratory and the host institution [...] participating created thematic groups based on research topics, enabling further collaboration with new national and regional groups.”

Institutions that had benefited from the programme were better positioned to scale and amplify individual research. At one University, strengthened institutional platforms enabled wider engagement: “For the conference, we received submissions from researchers in 16 francophone countries.” Similarly, another University described increased convening capacity and higher-level visibility: “The laboratory organised scientific days with former ministers and one current minister.” GDN’s platforms further reinforced this dynamic by creating institutional spaces through which individual research could reach broader policy and academic audiences.

In other words, vertical integration between institutional strengthening and individual capacity building was not automatic: it depended on intentional design and sustained institutional engagement. Where institutions were involved in supervising grantees, hosting review sessions, and disseminating outputs, spillover effects were strong and cumulative. Where such engagement was limited, individual gains remained fragmented. One young researcher highlighted the limited role of the host institution, explaining that engagement was largely administrative rather than substantive: “I was sponsored by the University, but the relationship was mainly with the project manager. As far as I was concerned, the manager looked at how the files were submitted, nothing more. I think it would be important to create real mechanisms or research dynamics with the laboratories, even online or in person, to allow for exchanges.” This experience was echoed by another respondent, who noted more bluntly, “I did not feel any particular support. Everyone stayed in their own corner.” These findings underscore the importance of treating the programmes as interdependent components of a single system, rather than as parallel tracks.

Despite these vertical synergies, interviews suggest there is further scope to strengthen the complementarity between programme activities and research communication through GlobalDev, particularly for early-career researchers. While grantees were producing research of increasing quality, there was not always a clear or systematic pathway for translating these outputs into policy-facing or public communication products, nor for linking researchers to GlobalDev as a platform for dissemination and editorial support. Several respondents indicated that awareness of GlobalDev among some grantees and host institutions remained limited. As a result, many participants did not fully access opportunities such as editorial support, publication outlets, or training focused on communicating research beyond academic formats.

This opportunity is particularly relevant for early-career researchers, for whom publication visibility and the ability to communicate research to broader audiences can be critical for professional development. Strengthening the articulation between programme outputs and GlobalDev’s communication platform could therefore help reinforce the impact of existing capacity-strengthening efforts. In this sense, GlobalDev has the potential to operate as a reinforcing dissemination and communication layer,

complementing the programme's investments in research production and institutional capacity.

From a systems perspective, this reflects an opportunity to further align three elements that are already present within GDN's ecosystem: individual research capacity, institutional strengthening, and research communication. Closer articulation between these elements could help ensure that research produced through GDN-supported programmes is not only generated and institutionally supported, but also translated, disseminated, and amplified through GDN's global communication platforms, strengthening the visibility and policy reach of participating researchers and institutions.

Finding 32: Programme coherence relied on flexible and participant-driven integration, but horizontal linkages between structurally similar programmes remained weak.

Interviews indicate that all programmes were conceptually aligned, but intentionally not bound through prescriptive integration mechanisms at inception. Rather than enforcing uniform pathways of coordination, GDN adopted a flexible design that allowed programme components to evolve independently and interact when actors deemed it appropriate. This reflects a broader network-oriented approach in which collaboration emerges through professional relationships, shared interests, and institutional initiative rather than through mandated programme architecture.

Within this framework, integration across programmes did occur in several notable ways, even if it was not systematically engineered. For example, the 2024 Evidence Fair brought together teams from the Sahel and DRA programmes, including a plenary panel examining research systems within the broader discussion on disinformation. Similarly, teams from IRCB Volet 1 collaborated with GDN to co-design and co-manage the regional grant scheme for young researchers, demonstrating an intentional effort to link institutional strengthening initiatives with opportunities for early-career researchers across the region. In addition, interviewees noted instances where grantees from one programme later served as mentors or resource persons in another, creating informal knowledge flows across programme streams.

At the same time, these linkages emerged selectively and opportunistically, rather than through systematic coordination across all programmes. Integration was therefore organic and uneven, shaped primarily by the initiative of institutions, mentors, and researchers rather than by central programme management. This pattern also reflected practical realities, including staggered programme start-up timelines and distinct funding cycles, which limited the feasibility of automatic integration from the outset.

As one respondent explained, “the links were there, but they were not automatic. It depended a lot on how the institution or the mentor took ownership.” Another interviewee echoed this assessment: “You could see the logic across the programmes, but on the ground, they were not always connected in a structured way.” This suggests that GDN’s model prioritised networked interaction and actor-driven collaboration, allowing programmes to intersect when useful rather than embedding formal coordination structures across all components. While this approach preserved flexibility and responsiveness, it also meant that cross-programme learning and collaboration depended heavily on initiative and opportunity rather than on structured programme design. In more mature institutional and national contexts, this flexibility enabled actors to embed individual learning into institutional routines, or to connect institutional outputs to national-level diagnostics. In more fragile or fragmented systems, however, programme components tended to operate in parallel.

At the same time, interviews highlight a coherence gap at the horizontal level, particularly between programmes addressing similar organisational functions. While two programmes focused on strengthening organisational research capacity, governance, visibility, and engagement with policy actors, there were limited systematic mechanisms for cross-programme exchange, joint learning, or collaboration. As a result, universities and think tanks working through different programme streams did not always interact.

At the same time, the programmes did incorporate notable design features intended to encourage institutional collaboration, particularly through the research funding scheme for young researchers. This scheme was deliberately structured in partnership with universities already supported under the programme, while remaining open to applicants across the broader region. Importantly, the management of the grants was distributed across five partner institutions, creating a shared governance model and encouraging institutional ownership of the research funding process. This represented an innovative attempt to embed collaboration and capacity strengthening simultaneously within participating institutions while extending opportunities to a wider regional pool of researchers.

In practice, interaction between institutions was largely demand-driven and episodic, rather than structured through programme design. Institutions within the same country occasionally engaged with one another when they shared a specific interest or opportunity, such as the collaboration observed among institutions in Burkina Faso, but these interactions were not systematically facilitated across programmes, cohorts, or countries. Universities and think tanks therefore rarely interacted across programme streams, even when they were addressing similar organisational challenges within their respective national research environments.

Interviewees consistently characterised this as a coordination gap rather than a conceptual flaw in programme design. In effect, programmes with near-identical capacity-strengthening objectives evolved as parallel tracks, reflecting the strong emphasis on grantee autonomy and demand-driven engagement rather than on building a cross-cohort or cross-programme community. While this approach preserved flexibility and responsiveness to institutional priorities, it also limited opportunities for structured peer exchange, shared reflection on organisational reform, and cumulative learning on engagement and positioning within national research and policy systems.
Despite these limitations, programme components often reinforced one another through their results, even in the absence of formal coordination. Individual-level investments strengthened research skills and credibility; institutional strengthening embedded these capacities within organisational routines, and other programmatic areas contributed to national-level visibility and legitimacy. In some cases, individual recognition translated into institutional and national-level effects despite weak activity-level integration. These reinforcing effects demonstrate that programme components functioned as complementary layers within the same research ecosystem, addressing different dimensions of shared structural constraints.

GDN's coherence challenges lie not in the absence of strategic logic, but in the limited presence of structured horizontal interfaces between closely related programmes. While flexibility enabled contextual responsiveness and participant-driven engagement, interaction across programmes largely depended on the initiative of programme managers and participants, rather than on formalised mechanisms for exchange or collaboration.

Interviews suggest that this pattern reflects deliberate trade-offs in programme design rather than a lack of coordination. Prioritising broad participation across successive programme rounds can allow more researchers and institutions to engage within their own national systems, whereas forcing the design of tightly integrated cross-programme collaboration may concentrate opportunities among a smaller set of actors and risk creating exclusive research communities. Several respondents therefore emphasised that GDN's model has often leaned toward supporting networks of actors working within their own institutional and national contexts, rather than establishing an integrated regional programme.

Where collaboration did emerge, often through close coordination between programme managers or through shared thematic interests, it demonstrated that such linkages were possible and sometimes productive. However, these examples remained selective rather than systematic. Findings therefore highlight the importance of distinguishing between coherence that reasonably emerges through local initiative and professional networks, and coherence that requires intentional design and dedicated resources. In practice, GDN appears to have prioritised widening access and supporting multiple institutional entry

points over building tightly integrated cross-programme communities, reflecting an implicit trade-off between programme-level cohesion and broader system reach.

7. Lessons Learned

7.1 Success Factors

1. Individual-Level Research Capacity Strengthening

A central success factor of GDN's individual-level programming was its emphasis on integrated research competence across the full research cycle, rather than isolated skills acquisition. Through applied mentoring and technical guidance, participants strengthened their ability to design, implement, analyse, and disseminate research, alongside their learning embedded in real research production: supporting skill retention beyond the grant period.

Mentorship was the primary consolidation mechanism, accelerating researcher autonomy and professionalisation. Mentors modelled research standards and progressively withdrew support, enabling participants to become self-directed researchers capable of defending methodological choices, managing projects, and navigating publication processes.

The programme also strengthened confidence, credibility, and professional identity: enabling researchers to pursue grants, publish, present, and engage in international research spaces. In addition, it generated critical (but often overlooked) capacities in grant and project management, including budgeting, reporting, and compliance: all skills essential for sustaining research careers.

2. Institutional-Level Research Capacity Strengthening

At the institutional level, formalisation of research governance was a decisive enabler. The establishment or consolidation of laboratories, research committees, internal regulations, and strategic plans shifted research from informal and personality-driven arrangements, to more system-centred organisational forms that strengthened accountability, coordination, and legitimacy.

Professionalisation of research administration and financial management unlocked fundability, enabling institutions to demonstrate fiduciary credibility and to participate competitively in donor-funded research. These capacities were developed through applied implementation, rather than stand-alone training.

Institution-based organizational support strengthened collective research culture, visibility, and policy engagement, while agenda autonomy allowed institutions to pursue locally grounded research priorities and engage funding ecosystems more strategically: reducing agenda distortion in politically sensitive contexts.

3. National-Level Research Capacity Strengthening

At the national level, the most consequential success factor was reframing research systems as systems. Throughout all programmes, GDN shifted policy debate from fragmented problem-listing, toward system-level reasoning about actors, incentives, and bottlenecks. This created a shared analytical language for dialogue, even where reform was not immediately feasible.

Legitimacy and visibility functioned as precursors to coordination, enabling research institutions to engage ministries and regulators as credible participants in policy dialogue and debate. Mentorship played a high-leverage role by facilitating political access, trust-building, and navigation of administrative barriers, particularly in fragile contexts.

GDN's flexible and non-prescriptive design allowed national-level effects to align with governance maturity and political openness, enabling differentiated pathways to influence across heterogeneous national contexts.

4. Global-Level Research Capacity Strengthening

At the global level, structural brokerage (not visibility alone), was the decisive success factor. GDN functioned as an intermediary that lowered administrative and reputational barriers, enabling Francophone African institutions to enter and remain within global research networks.

Neutrality and international credibility safeguarded power asymmetries and reduced transaction costs, allowing smaller or less visible institutions to participate meaningfully in global research systems. Designed networking mechanisms, particularly Evidence Fairs and programmatic exchanges, translated access into durable relationships, collaboration, and co-production.

Beyond programme delivery, GDN exerted normative influence by shaping donor and partner thinking on localisation, peer-to-peer engagement, and non-hierarchical capacity strengthening: representing a public-good contribution beyond direct beneficiaries.

5. Programme Coherence, Integration, and Complementarity

Coherence was strongest where programmes addressed different levels of the same system, therefore generating vertical synergies across individual, institutional, and national levels. Even without formal integration mechanisms, these linkages amplified results by embedding actors more firmly within research and policy systems.

GDN's flexible design enabled context-specific integration, allowing participants to link programmes where value was perceived. While activity-level coordination was limited across the programmes, results-level complementarity emerged as a key enabler driven by individual programme actors: individual capacity gains reinforced institutional credibility, institutional strengthening enhanced national visibility, and national diagnostics supported global legitimacy.

7.2 Challenges and Constraints

1. Individual-Level Research Capacity Strengthening

Individual-level capacity gains were uneven across participants, reflecting variation in mentoring quality, disciplinary fit, and institutional context. In some cases, distance between mentors and mentees limited depth of methodological support, particularly in specialised or qualitative fields. Further, virtual mentoring and connectivity constraints reduced interaction quality.

Support gaps were most visible at advanced data analysis and post-fieldwork stages, where access to specialised expertise and timely guidance was uneven. Administrative constraints, particularly disbursement delays and tranche limits, also disrupted research timelines. This introduced stress and inefficiencies, despite contributing to project management learning.

Finally, skill diffusion beyond individuals remained informal and context dependent. Spillovers relied heavily on individual initiative and institutional receptivity, underscoring the limits of individual-level research capacity strengthening in weak organizational, operational, and political environments.

2. Institutional-Level Research Capacity Strengthening

Institutional sustainability was constrained by short project cycles and weak funding ecosystems. Eighteen-to-twenty-four-month horizons were widely viewed as insufficient to consolidate governance, administrative, and cultural reforms, particularly in contexts with limited domestic research funding and weak commissioning mechanisms.

Administrative and compliance gains proved fragile wherein roles were not institutionalised, with project-funded functions often reverting to overstretched academic staff once funding ended. Institutional outcomes also varied significantly with leadership quality and absorptive capacity: where leadership was weak, gains remained person dependent.

A challenge likewise emerged among more successful institutions, wherein increased visibility attracted donor pressure, sometimes pulling organisations away from strategic priorities and risking agenda dilution in tightly constrained funding environments.

3. National-Level Research Capacity Strengthening

At the national level, increased recognition rarely translated into immediate policy reform. While GDN interventions stimulated debate, legitimacy, and awareness, these outcomes did not consistently translate into routine research use or institutionalised demand within policymaking systems.

Yet, this raises a broader question about what is reasonable to expect from internationally funded interventions. The institutionalisation of research use is typically shaped by domestic political incentives, governance structures, and long-term state capacity – factors that external programmes can influence but rarely control. In this context, GDN's contribution may be more appropriately understood as supporting discrete elements that strengthen the enabling environment for research use, such as generating credible research, legitimising national researchers, and fostering dialogue between researchers and policymakers. When political conditions are favourable, these components can collectively help move systems toward stronger research use, even if full institutionalisation remains beyond the direct scope of donor-funded interventions.

Demand for research remained fragile and person-dependent, vulnerable to political turnover and shifting priorities. Political instability, weak coordination capacity, and governance fragility further constrained outcomes, producing uneven effects across countries.

Short engagement horizons likewise limited consolidation: diagnostics and dialogue required continuity and follow-up in order to generate durable coordination, or demand for research. This was often absent once programme support ended.

4. Global-Level Research Capacity Strengthening

Global-level influence was constrained by a mismatch between long-term system change and short project cycles. Norm-setting, brokerage, and network integration required continuity beyond typical funding horizons, leaving some gains fragile.

Financial precarity posed risks to GDN's intermediary role, with limited core funding creating structural vulnerability despite strong credibility and neutrality. GlobalDev, while valuable, remained insufficiently embedded to function as a core amplification mechanism.

Finally, trade-offs existed between widening participation and deep institutional consolidation. GDN's model prioritized broad inclusion and access across a diverse set of researchers and institutions, rather than concentrating long-term funding in a small number of organisations. This approach reflects a broader philosophy within international research funding that sustained institutional permanence cannot realistically be driven by external actors alone. While some bilateral and philanthropic programmes have pursued deeper, multi-year institutional investments, these models often involve significant trade-offs. In particular, concentrating resources on a limited set of institutions can reduce the number of actors supported and may unintentionally reinforce existing hierarchies within national research systems by privileging established organisations. In contrast, GDN's emphasis on widening participation sought to distribute opportunities more broadly, even if this meant less emphasis on long-term institutional consolidation within a small number of grantees.

5. Programme Coherence, Integration, and Complementarity

The most significant coherence challenge was weak horizontal integration between structurally similar programmes, which operated largely in isolation despite overlapping objectives and ecosystems. Where integration did occur, it depended on individual initiative, rather than programme design. This produced uneven and context-dependent linkages.

7.3 Lessons on GDN's Model

1. Lessons for Intensifying the Same Programming Approach

Across levels, the evaluation shows that GDN's model functioned most effectively when engagement was sufficiently deep, sustained, and sequenced to allow learning and legitimacy to consolidate. At the individual level, mentorship that fostered autonomy proved central to durable capacity gains. At the institutional level, governance reform, administrative professionalisation, and cultural change emerged incrementally and required time to stabilise. At national and global levels, influence depended on repeated engagement, rather than one-off interventions, as legitimacy, trust, and system framing accrued gradually.

Relational functions were as important as technical ones. Mentorship operated not only as skills support, but as professional socialisation at the individual level. It likewise provided political and relational brokerage at national levels. Similarly, GDN's global-level role relied on its capacity to mediate relationships and power asymmetries, rather than simply disseminate outputs.

Finally, the evaluation highlights that vertical alignment across system levels strengthened impact, even without formal integration. Where individual, institutional, and national interventions addressed complementary dimensions of the same constraints, results reinforced one another over time. This finding also contributes to broader reflections on the balance of agency between national actors and donors. In this case, the reinforcing effects observed across programme levels were not primarily driven by donor-mandated coordination, but by the initiative and decision-making of participants. As such, the results illustrate how national actors exercised meaningful agency within the programme, shaping collaboration and alignment beyond the structures of donor-driven networks.

2. Lessons for Duplicating the Programming Approach

GDN's model is transferable only when its core design logic is preserved. Across levels, the model depended on embedding capacity strengthening within real processes: research production, organisational reform, national dialogue, and global networking, rather than delivering stand-alone training or visibility activities. In other words, learning emerged through practice, iteration, and engagement with real constraints.

A second lesson is that context sensitivity is integral, not optional. Outcomes varied significantly depending on institutional absorptive capacity, governance maturity, political openness, and ecosystem strength. The model performed differently across contexts, reinforcing that duplication requires differentiated expectations and a recognition that capacity strengthening unfolds unevenly.

The evaluation also shows that intermediary functions are not easily substitutable. At global and national levels, GDN's neutrality, credibility, and ability to absorb administrative and political risk were central to outcomes. Replicating surface elements of the programme (e.g. convenings or diagnostics) without the intermediary role GDN played, would likely reproduce existing exclusions, rather than further diversify participation.

3. Lessons for the Wider Donor Community

For donors, the evaluation reinforces that research capacity strengthening is a long-horizon systems process, not a short-term delivery exercise. Across all levels, gains in skills, governance, legitimacy, and network positioning preceded observable behavioural or policy change. Visibility and awareness were necessary, but insufficient for sustained research use (or institutional transformation).

The findings also underline that neutral intermediaries play an important functional role in unequal research systems, particularly by funding the research agendas of less visible national research actors and institutions to encourage their participation in the broader research ecosystem. However, the deeper structural drivers of inequality lie largely

beyond the direct control of intermediaries and, to a significant extent, beyond the reach of individual donor programmes. GDN's ability to lower administrative barriers, buffer power asymmetries, and protect agenda autonomy enabled participation by smaller or less visible institutions that would otherwise remain excluded. Neutrality emerged not as a normative position on the part of GDN, but as an operational asset.

Finally, the evaluation highlights that portfolio coherence matters as much as programme quality. While GDN achieved strong vertical coherence across levels, weaker horizontal integration limited learning and consolidation. For donors supporting multiple capacity-strengthening initiatives within the same ecosystem, coherence cannot be assumed to emerge organically; it shapes whether investments reinforce or fragment system-level change.

GDN's model operates most effectively as a system-oriented, intermediary-led, approach that prioritises legitimacy, autonomy, and relational infrastructure over rapid results. Its strengths lie in widening participation, reframing research systems, and enabling engagement across unequal contexts. Its limits reflect the temporal, political, and organisational realities of research capacity strengthening in emerging contexts.

8. Recommendations

8.1 GDN

1. Deepen differentiated and autonomy-oriented mentoring across the research cycle.

Introduce tiered mentoring tracks that differentiate support by discipline, methodology, and research stage, with explicit attention to advanced analysis and post-fieldwork synthesis. Research shows that mentoring is most effective when it adapts to researchers' evolving needs, rather than applying a uniform model. Differentiated tracks would allow early-stage researchers to focus on core research design and methods, while more advanced participants receive targeted support on complex analysis, synthesis, and publication. This reinforces autonomy and sustained research competence.

2. Institutionalise light-touch and post-grant support for early-career researchers.

Establish structured follow-up support focused on publication, grant re-application, and career transitions, after formal fellowship completion. Many individual-level gains continue to mature after grant closure, particularly around publishing and re-entering funding markets. Extending light-touch support would help to consolidate these gains during critical transition phases, without extending full programme costs or intensity.

3. **Extend institutional engagement programme time horizons to enable consolidation of reforms.**

Design multi-phase institutional engagements that allow governance, administrative, and cultural reforms to move from initiation to consolidation, as institutional change unfolds incrementally. Short project cycles support initiation, but rarely allow absorption of reforms into routine practice. Longer or sequenced engagements would enable institutions to stabilise governance, professionalise administration, and embed new research cultures more durably.

4. **Integrate leadership and change management as explicit capacity strengthening domains.**

Embed leadership development and organisational change practices within institutional-level programming, focusing on delegation, continuity, and absorptive capacity. The translation of individual skills into institutional performance depends heavily on leadership practices. Thus, making leadership and change management explicit in program design would reduce reliance on individual champions and support more collective and sustainable institutional learning.

5. **Sequence national-level engagement beyond research diagnostics, toward sustained dialogue.**

Pair national diagnostics with structured (follow-on) engagement mechanisms, in order to maintain momentum and deepen coordination over time. Diagnostics successfully reframe national research systems, but rarely translate into sustained demand on their own. Thus, planned follow-on engagement would help to convert reflection and legitimacy into more long-term coordination and dialogue.

6. **Formalise the national-level brokerage role of mentors.**

Recognise and systematise mentors' boundary-spanning and access-brokering functions as a core design feature of national-level work. Mentors played a decisive role in navigating political access, trust, and administrative barriers, yet this function remained implicit. Formal recognition would strengthen effectiveness, particularly in fragile or politically constrained research contexts.

7. **Apply differentiated national strategies for research capacity strengthening, better aligned with governance maturity.**

Tailor national-level interventions to political openness, coordination capacity, and existing research-policy interfaces. National outcomes varied significantly by context.

Maintaining differentiated strategies acknowledges that national research systems evolve at different speeds and through different pathways.

8. **Fully embed GlobalDev as a cross-cutting function across programmes.**

Integrate research communication, editorial support, and amplification pathways into all programme designs. GlobalDev's potential to amplify local research remains underutilised due to its current peripheral positioning. Systematic integration of this programme component would strengthen visibility, voice, and influence across all GDN investments.

9. **Strengthen horizontal coherence between structurally similar portfolio programmes.**

Introduce light, but deliberate, mechanisms for joint learning, exchange, and coordination between programmes which address similar thematic areas. Structured exchange would reduce duplication and enable cross-fertilisation between university- and think tank-based models.

10. **Maintain a layered, system-level, programme design for future investments.**

Continue designing individual, institutional, and national interventions as complementary components, addressing different levels of the same system. Vertical layering emerged as a core strength of GDN's model, enabling reinforcement across levels even where direct coordination was limited. Preserving and expanding this architecture supports system-level impact.

11. **Promote inclusion in global research systems for individuals and institutions through targeted engagement strategies.**

GDN has been effective in widening participation, but newer entrants often require additional support to stabilise their global positioning and to avoid marginal or temporary inclusion in the broader research ecosystem. This can be mitigated by combining widened access to global research spaces, with targeted support for partnership formation among newly connected institutions and individuals.

8.2 Donors

12. **Secure longer-term, more predictable, funding for programmes.**

Prioritise multi-year or pooled funding arrangements that protect GDN's neutrality, while enabling sustained global network engagement. Global-level brokerage and norm-setting

are cumulative processes that require continuity. Longer-term funding would reduce vulnerability linked to project cycles and safeguard GDN's intermediary identity.

13. Invest in portfolio-level coherence as a funded function of GDN's operations.

Set out to explicitly curate learning, alignment, and complementarity across programmes, rather than assuming coherence will emerge organically. The evaluation shows that coherence requires active facilitation. Treating coherence as a funded function under GDN's operations would strengthen learning, reduce fragmentation, and improve cumulative impact across the portfolio.

8.3 Partner Institutions

14. Protect research agenda autonomy for institutions, while also managing the risks of agenda dilution.

Reinforce safeguards that enable institutions to remain strategically selective in their research agendas, especially as visibility and fundability increase. Increased credibility often exposes institutions to pressure to chase funding opportunistically. Protecting agenda autonomy helps sustain locally grounded research strategies and long-term positioning.

15. Formalise research management and administration as core institutional functions under the umbrella of research capacity strengthening.

Require explicit pathways for absorbing project-funded research management roles into permanent institutional structures. Administrative and financial gains are most vulnerable when roles remain project dependent. Clear absorption pathways within institutions and think tanks would reduce the erosion of compliance and coordination capacities for individuals and processes once programme funding ends, strengthening long-term institutional resilience.

Annex 1: DRA - Context

The DRA programme is a flagship initiative of the GDN that aims to build an evidence base on national research systems in low- and middle-income countries. Its core objective is to identify systemic barriers and opportunities shaping the production, governance, dissemination, and use of social science research, in order to inform more strategic and evidence-based investments by both national and international funders. In this sense, the programme positions research systems as a policy-relevant sector in their own right, comparable to health, agriculture, education, or trade, where routine system-level diagnostics are commonly used to guide public and donor investment.

The DRA initiative operates from the premise that the primary levers of change within research systems rest with national actors, including ministries, public research institutions, and research communities themselves. GDN's contribution is therefore not to drive reform directly, but to generate rigorous, comparable evidence that can reinsert research systems into national policy debates and support more informed decision-making. Success is understood less in terms of immediate policy change, and more in terms of fostering national dialogue around research quality, governance, societal value, and the forms of support required to strengthen the sector over time.

The central analytical tool of the programme is a mixed-methods research module designed to provide a structured, contextualized examination of national research systems. DRAs combine contextual analysis, stakeholder mapping, and a standardized assessment framework based on indicators supported by primary and secondary quantitative and qualitative data. While the methodology is standardized to allow for cross-country comparability, it is deliberately adapted and developed by national research teams to reflect country-specific political, institutional, and historical contexts.

DRAs are implemented by competitively selected local research institutions, which lead the assessment over a period of approximately 18 months. GDN provides backstopping support, including methodological guidance, grant management, advanced statistical support, and assistance with dissemination and international networking. A key feature of the model is its emphasis on national ownership of both the research process and the resulting evidence, with local teams positioned as reference points for ongoing debate and analysis on research systems in their countries.

In Francophone Africa, the DRA programme has recently been completed in Benin, Mali, Chad, and Tunisia, with an additional DRA ongoing in Cameroon and one halted in Burkina Faso. All DRAs in the region are funded by AFD through the PCDI grant, with the exception of Tunisia, which is funded by the European Union via Expertise France under the Savoirs Eco country programme, following an explicit request from the Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research.

Within this context, the DRA case study situates the assessment as a systemic, evidence-generating instrument intended to support national debate, guide investment decisions, and contribute to longer-term learning on how research systems function and evolve, rather than as a standalone intervention with immediate, attributable outcomes.

Annex 2: IRCB Volet 1 - Context

The IRCB Volet 1 programme was designed to respond to persistent structural constraints affecting research institutions in Francophone Africa, particularly the limited ability of universities to invest in their own research systems beyond project-based activities. While institutions regularly manage externally funded research, resources equivalent to overheads that could be reinvested in institutional development are rarely available. IRCB Volet 1 was developed to address this gap by testing the use of relatively small and flexible institutional grants, used to support institution-led investments in research capacity: all while remaining grounded in each institution's own diagnosis, priorities, and strategic vision. The program offers universities a grant between EUR 50,000 - 100,000 with a funding period that covers a period of 18 - 24 months.

Under Volet 1, universities were competitively selected through a two-stage process, emphasising institutional self-analysis and ownership. Institutions first submitted expressions of interest outlining their assessment of internal capacity constraints and proposed areas for strengthening. Shortlisted institutions then participated in a facilitated workshop, during which they presented, discussed, and challenged their proposed strategies in dialogue with peers and programme mentors. This process allowed institutions to revise their initial proposals and translate them into coherent and fundable capacity strengthening plans. The approach prioritised reflexive planning, peer learning, and adaptability, over adherence to pre-defined institutional templates.

Between 2021 and 2025, IRCB Volet 1 supported five universities across four countries (Senegal, Democratic Republic of Congo, Benin, and Côte d'Ivoire). Grant funding was used to support a range of institution-led actions aimed at strengthening internal research systems, including research governance, management and coordination functions, internal training processes, and mechanisms for research production and dissemination. Although the specific interventions varied across institutions, Volet 1 was explicitly framed as an investment in institutional research systems, rather than support to individual research projects.

Volet 1 was embedded within a broader programmatic architecture which also included support to early-career researchers under IRCB Volet 2. As such, universities supported under Volet 1 played an active role in the design and management of Volet 2, creating an intentional linkage between institutional strengthening and individual capacity building. This structure was intended to encourage vertical integration across programme components, positioning universities not only as beneficiaries of funding, but also as stewards of researcher development and research culture.

Within this context, effectiveness under IRCB Volet 1 is understood as the extent to which the programme contributed to strengthening universities' internal research and

management capacities: enabling them to function more autonomously, strategically, and coherently within national and regional research ecosystems.

Annex 3: IRCB Volet 2 - Context

The IRCB programme was designed to strengthen social science research capacity in Francophone Africa through a dual focus on institutions (Volet 1) and individuals (Volet 2). While Volet 1 targets research institutions through multi-year institutional grants, Volet 2 responds to a distinct and complementary challenge at the individual level: the limited opportunities for early-career researchers to independently lead and manage research projects, despite having strong academic training and demonstrated research potential.

GDN's approach to individual-level support has evolved over time. Earlier models relied primarily on channeling resources through regional networks or institutions for onward re-granting. Learning from this experience, and informed by sustained engagement with grantees and young researchers across Francophone Africa, GDN refined its understanding of the structural bottlenecks affecting research careers in the region. Discussions with researchers and partner institutions highlighted a critical gap faced by researchers who are technically well trained but remain constrained in their ability to act as principal investigators. This group typically includes researchers at the Master's level with 8+ years of post-degree experience, as well as PhD holders within the first five years after graduation, who often continue to work under senior researchers and have limited access to independent funding, mentorship, and project management experience.

Volet 2 was conceived as a direct response to this gap. Rather than focusing narrowly on age-based eligibility, the programme targets researchers at a specific career stage: those who have developed solid research skills but have not yet had the opportunity to lead their own research projects. The underlying assumption is that access to a modest but flexible research grant, combined with structured mentoring and hands-on project management support, can play a decisive role in helping these researchers consolidate their profiles and transition toward greater professional autonomy.

The pilot edition of Volet 2, selected 60 researchers from nine Francophone African countries through a competitive, multi-stage process. Each selected researcher received a grant of up to EUR 10,000 to implement an individual research project over a one-year period, alongside tailored mentoring and technical supervision. In addition to funding research activities, the programme was explicitly designed as a learning-by-doing mechanism, enabling grantees to acquire practical experience in proposal refinement, budget management, research implementation, reporting, and dissemination. The programme also required grantees to prepare research outputs suitable for submission to peer-reviewed journals or academic publishers, reinforcing its focus on tangible professional outcomes.

A distinctive feature of Volet 2 is its integration within the broader IRCB architecture. Management of the individual grants was deliberately embedded within the ecosystem created under Volet 1, with selected research institutions participating in the co-design

and co-management of the grant scheme. This arrangement aimed not only to strengthen the managerial capacities of partner institutions, but also to situate individual researchers within supportive institutional environments, potentially enhancing mentorship, visibility, and longer-term sustainability of results.

Volet 2 therefore operates at the intersection of individual capacity development and institutional context. It reflects GDN's broader strategic shift toward supporting research careers as trajectories, rather than isolated training events or one-off funding opportunities.

Annex 4: Savoirs Sahel - Context

Savoirs Sahel is part of GDN's broader effort to strengthen the research-policy nexus, by engaging with think tanks that seek to position themselves as key players in the chain of knowledge production, mediation, and use. Originally, the programme was designed in response to persistent constraints faced by Sahel-based research organisations, including: limited visibility, uneven institutional capacity, constrained resources, and weak integration into national and regional policy ecosystems. To address these challenges, Savoirs Sahel combines institutional capacity strengthening, peer learning, and structured opportunities for engagement with policy actors. The program works with selected think tanks to enhance their capacity to produce high-quality analysis, communicate evidence effectively, and position themselves as credible contributors to public debate and decision-making processes.

Building on lessons from earlier phases, the initiative combines flexible financial support with mentoring, peer exchange, and structured dissemination opportunities. Rather than prescribing research topics, it allows participating organizations to work within their own thematic priorities, enabling them to respond to national development challenges while also strengthening their institutional foundations. This approach reflects the recognition that sustainable policy influence requires context-sensitive knowledge of policy and research needs and institutional ability to operate within the ecosystem.

Designed as a capacity-strengthening and positioning initiative rather than a narrowly defined research project, its core design principles include flexibility, ownership, and gradual institutional development. By providing relatively modest but catalytic resources, the program enables think tanks to invest in activities that are often underfunded, such as agenda-setting, communication, networking, and internal professionalization.

The program's intended outcomes operate at multiple levels. At the organizational level, it aims to strengthen research planning, project management, communication practices, and strategic positioning. At the individual level, it seeks to enhance researchers' professional trajectories by improving their analytical skills, visibility, and credibility within national and regional policy communities. At the ecosystem level, the program aspires to contribute to more informed public debate, by amplifying locally grounded evidence and facilitating dialogue between think tanks, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

Perhaps most importantly, the initiative does not assume immediate policy change as a primary outcome. Instead, it recognizes that influence is cumulative and relational, and that early impacts are more likely to appear as improved credibility, stronger networks, and increased demand for analysis. This reflects a realistic understanding of policy engagement in politically complex and resource-constrained environments.

Savoirs Sahel 2 forms part of GDN's broader approach to strengthening research ecosystems in Francophone Africa, which emphasizes locally driven capacity building, flexible support, and long-term institutional development. Across its portfolio, GDN works with universities, think tanks, and research networks to reinforce research culture, improve managerial capacity, and enhance the visibility and policy relevance of locally produced knowledge. Within this model, it complements GDN's university-focused and researcher-focused initiatives by targeting independent policy research organizations that operate at the interface between evidence and decision-making. While other programs focus on building research capacity within academic institutions, or supporting early-career researchers, this program addresses the specific role of think tanks as intermediaries capable of translating research into policy-relevant insights.

These initiatives aimed to strengthen individuals, institutions, and intermediary organizations simultaneously, in order to create more resilient and impactful research ecosystems. This initiative contributes to this ecosystem-wide approach by reinforcing the capacity of think tanks to engage in public debate, inform policy discussions, and collaborate across borders: thereby enhancing the overall visibility and influence of Francophone African research.

Annex 5: Benchmarking GDN against other models

Feature	GDN	IDRC	FCDO	AFD
Core Role	Acts as a neutral intermediary and broker between donors and partners	Acts as a direct funder of research programmes	Acts as a bilateral funder shaping research partnerships	Acts as a bilateral partnership funder (e.g. PeA programme)
Approach to Funding	Absorbs administrative burden and facilitates access to funding	Provides funding with own priorities and grant structures	Funds large programmes aligned to UK development priorities	Funds programmes aligned to French policy and cooperation goals
Agenda Setting	Does not impose research themes; protects agenda autonomy	Supports locally led research that aligns research to donor priorities and policy agendas	Aligns research to donor priorities and policy agendas	Aligns partnerships to national policy and economic priorities
Model of Engagement	Enables peer-to-peer, non-hierarchical collaboration	Supports expert-led research and peer learning networks, emphasis on consortium building	Builds formal consortia and institutional partnerships	Builds structured university partnerships and programmes
Access & Participation	Expands access to smaller and less visible institutions	Supports credible/larger institutions able to compete for funding	Works through established institutions and consortia	Works through selected universities and institutional anchors
Institutional Focus	Supports individuals, institutions, and systems	Focuses on building local research	Focuses on long-term institutional and	Focuses on long-term academic and institutional collaboration

	simultaneously	expertise	consortium development	
Strengths	Reduces barriers, increases equity, and enables broad participation in global networks	Strong on locally grounded research and knowledge use	Strong on scale, infrastructure, and long-term programmes	Strong on deep institutional partnerships and mobility programmes
Trade-offs	Weaker on long-term institutional consolidation at scale	Operates within funder-recipient hierarchy	Can reinforce donor-driven agendas and power structures	Can embed partners within bilateral policy frameworks