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Doing Research in BENIN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Global Development Network is a public international organization that supports high-quality, policy-oriented social science research in low- and middle-income countries to promote better lives.

The African Center for Equitable Development (ACED) is a think-and-do tank addressing the persistent gap between the production of knowledge and its practical application to policy and practice.

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Introduction

In a global knowledge economy and within the context of the Sustainable Development Goals, it is increasingly recognised that harnessing local research is essential for socio-economic development. However, the current state of research systems in developing countries is a cause for concern, as it does not always enable local researchers to produce high-quality research capable of informing public debate and public policy. An in-depth analysis is therefore needed to understand how to bridge the gap between research and policy and raise the profile of locally generated knowledge.

The social sciences research system in Benin possesses substantial human capital but often operates in isolation from the needs of decision-makers. Despite a favourable regulatory environment within national universities, the contribution of research to local development remains unclear. Benin continues to rely heavily on external support and does not yet have an autonomous national research system, either financially or technically. The major challenge is to structure this ecosystem to enable local talent to contribute fully to the development of evidence-based policies.

The Doing Research Assessment (DRA) in Benin was conducted by the **African Centre for Equitable Development (ACED)**. It constitutes a systematic analysis aimed at providing comprehensive and comparable information on local research, using a methodology validated at the global level since 2017 and adapted to the national context in 2024. The mixed-methodology approach combines rigorous desk research with qualitative and quantitative data collection surveys. It is structured around three stages: a context analysis, a mapping of the national research landscape (identifying influential and capable stakeholders), and a survey of key informants (researchers, decision-makers, administrators) to inform indicators of research production, dissemination and use.

Key Findings

Social science research in Benin operates within a system rich in stakeholders but weakened by deep-seated structural constraints. The country has a significant pool of talent, with around 1,034 researchers specialising in the social sciences. This academic base demonstrates real potential, particularly as Benin's scientific visibility has gradually improved over the last fifteen years. However, this progress masks a more nuanced reality: individual scientific output remains low, with barely 0.34 publications per researcher between 2020 and 2022. This discrepancy suggests that human capacity is not yet fully translating into intellectual output, revealing broader systemic constraints.

Funding appears to be one of the critical bottlenecks in the system, severely limiting its development. The chronic underfunding of social science research constitutes a major obstacle. Annual public investment, estimated at just €606 per researcher, remains largely insufficient to support competitive scientific activity. This budgetary shortfall forces researchers to rely heavily on international funding, which accounts for more than half of available resources. Such dependence exposes the system to external priorities, which are sometimes disconnected from local needs.

Research infrastructure, which is often inadequate, effectively hampers day-to-day scientific work. Beyond financial resources, the physical conditions for research remain a cause for concern. Laboratories are frequently poorly equipped and ill-suited to contemporary requirements. Access to scientific databases is limited, which restricts the integration of Beninese researchers into the international dynamics of knowledge production. Added to this are internet connectivity issues, which complicate access to information and remote collaboration, now essential to research.

The lack of national coordination undermines the coherence and impact of the research system. The institutional landscape is highly fragmented. Nearly 500 organisations are involved in social science research, but without a unified strategic framework. The absence of a dedicated national body or a coherent policy leads to a scattering of efforts and limits potential synergies. In this context, initiatives remain isolated, and nationwide initiatives struggle to emerge.

The link between research and public decision-making remains largely under-exploited. Despite their potential to inform public policy, researchers are rarely involved in decision-making processes. Formal collaboration between scientists and policymakers is virtually non-existent (2–3%), as illustrated by the fact that only one in six researchers has produced a policy brief in the last three years. Public authorities rarely seek academic expertise when drafting legislation, which widens the gap between knowledge production and public action.

Scientific communication remains insufficiently focused on society. Finally, knowledge dissemination practices reveal another structural limitation. Researchers' training places a strong emphasis on academic publication, often aimed at a limited audience, to the detriment of public outreach. Only a third of researchers engage in simplified communication activities aimed at the general public or the media. This limited dissemination restricts the social impact of research and contributes to its isolation from citizens and non-academic stakeholders.

Leverages for change

For social science research to become a genuine driver of development in Benin, structural transformation is required through five clearly identified strategic levers.

This transformation is not a matter of marginal adjustments, but of a strong political commitment capable of fundamentally restructuring a system that is currently fragmented and under-optimised. The following five pillars form the foundations of sustainable change, acting simultaneously on governance, resources, incentives, skills and intergenerational transmission.

1. **Establishing a national coordinating body is the cornerstone of any ambitious reform.** In a landscape fragmentated across nearly 500 organisations, the creation of a dedicated public institution would help to structure the entire system. This body would be tasked with defining national research priorities in line with the country's socio-economic needs, whilst facilitating dialogue between universities, research centres, decision-makers and technical partners. It would also play a key role in regulation, notably by ensuring compliance with ethical and scientific standards. In short, it is the essential lever for transforming a patchwork of isolated initiatives into a coherent national strategy.

2. **The creation of a national infrastructure fund is an essential prerequisite for improving scientific quality.** The current limitations of infrastructure cannot be overcome without dedicated and sustained investment. A fund specifically dedicated to research would enable the financing of the construction and modernisation of laboratories, the development of libraries, and access to international databases. It could also support improvements in digital connectivity, which has become a cornerstone of research. Managed transparently, this mechanism would provide researchers with a suitable working environment, a prerequisite for producing robust and internationally competitive knowledge.

3. **The introduction of incentives for the local reelvance of research is a decisive lever for reorienting academic practices.** Today, researchers are primarily assessed on the basis of their international academic publications, which limits their engagement in activities with a strong local impact. A reform of promotion criteria, particularly within the framework of CAMES, would allow for the recognition of the production of public policy briefs, outreach activities, and participation in national debates. By valuing these contributions, the system would encourage researchers to become more involved in the country's challenges, thereby reducing the gap between scientific knowledge and public action.

4. **Strengthening scientific communication skills is a key challenge for increasing the impact of research.** The production of knowledge is not enough if it is not accessible and understandable to the relevant audiences. Incorporating communication modules into training programmes, particularly doctoral programmes, would equip researchers with the tools to engage with the media, communicate their work to the general public, and address decision-makers effectively. These skills, which remain underdeveloped, are nevertheless essential for bringing research into the public sphere and reinforcing its social utility.

5. **Finally, the institutionalisation of mentoring represents a strategic investment in the future of the system.** The renewal and professional development of researchers require structured, high-quality support. The introduction of formal mentoring programmes would support early-career researchers on their career paths by facilitating the transfer of expertise, best practices and professional networks. By valuing this role within institutions, the system would strengthen its capacity to train a new generation of competent, independent and committed researchers.

Conclusions

Key points

- **Concentration of talent:** Over 52% of researchers are concentrated in just three public universities, 71% of whom are at the University of Abomey-Calavi.

- **Invisible local output:** No scientific journals from Benin are currently indexed in major international databases such as Scopus, which severely limits the global visibility of locally produced knowledge.

- **Dependence on external funding:** Over 50% of research funding in the country comes from international organisations.

The social sciences research system in Benin currently appears to be a stalled engine, rich in potential but unable to fully convert its resources into tangible change.

Over the last fifteen years, undeniable progress has been made: the number of PhD holders has increased, as has the volume of scientific publications. However, this momentum remains largely mechanical, driven primarily by the requirements of academic promotion, particularly those of CAMES, rather than by a national strategic vision geared towards development. Thus, the system produces, but without any real direction, like a machine spinning in circles without bringing about structural change.

This paradox is compounded by a persistent gap between research and public decision-making, despite mutual recognition of their usefulness.

On the one hand, policymakers recognise the importance of data and analysis in guiding public policy. On the other, researchers are convinced of their ability to inform these decisions. Yet this convergence of principles is not reflected in practice: authorities rarely seek scientific expertise, whilst researchers produce few accessible tools, such as policy briefs. Between knowledge and action, the bridge remains to be built.

This inertia is exacerbated by structural fragmentation that disperses energies rather than amplifying them. With nearly 500 organisations involved in research, Benin's institutional landscape is dense but fragmented. In the absence of a central coordination mechanism, initiatives multiply without real synergy, sometimes redundantly. This dispersion prevents the emergence of interdisciplinary teams capable of addressing complex and systemic challenges, such as security, climate change or sustainable agricultural development.

Added to these organisational constraints is a deeper reality: the structural poverty of the system. With public investment limited to around €606 per researcher per year, research operates in a state of chronic underfunding. This situation forces many researchers to take on additional work to make ends meet, which in turn reduces the time devoted to research. Under these conditions, scientific activity often becomes secondary, fragmented, and difficult to reconcile with the demands of rigorous and continuous research output.

Finally, cultural and linguistic barriers limit the scope and local relevance of research. Although researchers adhere to international academic standards, their work remains largely influenced by Western theoretical frameworks, which are sometimes ill-suited to local realities. This 'outward-looking' orientation is compounded by another major obstacle: language. Research findings are rarely disseminated in local languages, thereby excluding the communities directly concerned. Research, which is supposed to inform society, thus remains distant from those it studies.

Thus, the diagnosis is clear: the social science research system in Benin lacks neither talent nor potential, but suffers from a set of structural, institutional and cultural barriers that limit its impact. Transforming this stalled engine into a genuine lever for development requires not only technical reforms, but also a profound reorientation towards a model that is more integrated, inclusive and rooted in national realities.

Recommendations

To translate these levers for change into effective action, a coordinated mobilisation of stakeholders is required around structural operational measures.

These recommendations aim to move beyond diagnostic findings to set in motion a dynamic of sustainable transformation, by linking governance, financing, incentives and capacity building.

A. The establishment of a multi-stakeholder committee is an essential first step in structuring dialogue and setting priorities.

The government would benefit from establishing a formal consultation framework bringing together universities, sectoral ministries, civil society organisations and the private sector. Such a committee would enable research agendas to be aligned with the country's real needs, particularly in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Beyond co , it would play a strategic role in identifying national priorities, pooling resources and monitoring the impact of research policies.

B. The modernisation of infrastructure must build on existing mechanisms, in particular the FNRSIT, to ensure efficiency and sustainability.

The National Fund for Scientific Research and Technological Innovation (FNRSIT) can serve as a key lever for funding infrastructure upgrades. Its role should be strengthened by prioritising investment in the modernisation of laboratory equipment, the development of digital libraries, and the improvement of internet connectivity. Transparent and strategic management

of this fund would enable the gradual bridging of the structural deficit that is holding back scientific output.

C. Recognition of science communication must be embedded at the heart of academic evaluation mechanisms.

To encourage research that is more open and better connected to society, it is crucial to broaden the criteria for academic promotion. Taking into account the number of press articles, podcasts, videos or media appearances would help to recognise efforts to disseminate knowledge to the general public. Such a change would encourage researchers to make their work more accessible, thereby helping to bridge the gap between scientific output and public engagement.

D. The overhaul of doctoral programmes is a key lever for adapting researchers' skills to contemporary demands.

Doctoral programmes should mandatorily include modules dedicated to the use of digital tools, the management of one's scientific identity online, and strategies for international visibility. These skills have become essential for effectively disseminating research, strengthening collaborations and positioning Beninese researchers within global scientific networks.

E. Finally, the institutionalisation of formal mentoring programmes is crucial to ensuring the next generation of researchers and the quality of the system.

Research institutions must develop clear policies governing mentoring, including training for mentors, the setting of educational objectives, and personalised support for early-career researchers. Beyond scientific support, these programmes should incorporate emotional and professional aspects, in order to help early-career researchers navigate an environment that is often challenging. This investment in people is crucial to building a resilient and sustainable research system.

Limitations of the research

The limitations of the research influence the scope of the findings. One of the main obstacles lies in access to secondary data. Indeed, this research suffered from a significant lack of information on researchers operating outside the national public university system. This gap reduces the ability to paint a complete picture of the research landscape, leaving a potentially active but poorly documented part of the scientific community in the shadows.

Data collection was also hampered by limited participation from policy-makers. Organising interviews with government officials proved particularly difficult, due to their busy schedules and, in some cases, a lack of availability or willingness to participate. This constraint limited the inclusion of their perspectives in the analysis, even though they are essential for understanding the dynamics between research and public policy.

Finally, methodological choices regarding bibliographic sources introduce a bias into the assessment of scientific output. The use of the Scimago database, whilst relevant for international comparisons, does not provide exhaustive coverage of African journals. Consequently, part of Benin's scientific output, particularly that published in local journals, is excluded from the analysis. This likely leads to an underestimation of the actual volume of research produced in the country.

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