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

Case Study: Doing Research Assesments

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Acronyms

AFD	Agence Francaise de Developpement
DRA	Doing Research Assessments
GDN	Global Development Network
IRCB	Institutional Research Capacity Building
KII	Key Informant Interview
SGD	Small Group Discussion
PCDI	Pôle clermontois de développement international

Executive Summary

To be added in the second draft.

1. Introduction

The Global Development Network (GDN) has been implementing a multi-pronged initiative in Francophone Africa since 2021. This initiative builds on GDN's decade-long efforts to refine funding practices in research capacity strengthening, ensuring that internationally funded interventions are demand-driven and aligned with the realities of national and regional research ecosystems. To date, the programme 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.
2. **Institutional Research Capacity Building (IRCB Volet 1):** Supporting five universities and research institutions to implement self-defined capacity-strengthening strategies.
3. **Regional Grant Scheme for Young Researchers (IRCB Volet 2):** Providing early-career researchers with funding, mentoring, and training to help launch sustainable research careers.
4. **Think Tank Strengthening in the Sahel (Savoir Sahel 2):** Supporting seven think tanks with grants and mentoring to increase their influence on public and policy debates.
5. **Training in Research Communication (GlobalDev):** Addressing gaps in outreach through targeted training and the use of GlobalDev as a dissemination platform.

1.1 Case Study Purpose and Scope

Purpose

The purpose of this case study is to provide a focused, in-depth examination of the Design Research Assessment (DRA) as one component of the broader research capacity strengthening portfolio. The case study aims to deepen understanding of how the DRA contributes to generating evidence on national research systems and how this evidence is intended to inform funding and investment decisions by international and national research funders.

Specifically, the case study seeks to:

- Examine the relevance of the DRA in responding to the information needs of funders and national stakeholders, including how assessment findings are expected to support more informed, strategic investments in research systems.
- Explore early evidence of effectiveness, with attention to the design and implementation of the DRA, stakeholder engagement processes, and the perceived

usefulness and credibility of the data generated, recognizing that this represents a first iteration without established benchmarks.

- Assess coherence between the DRA and other research capacity strengthening initiatives, including the extent to which the assessment complements or informs broader portfolio objectives and approaches.

- Identify early signals of potential impact and sustainability, as well as key constraints and risks that may affect uptake, use, and longer-term influence of DRA findings.

Scope

This case study focuses on the DRA as implemented across selected countries that have fully completed the DRA process. It examines the DRA as a cross-cutting analytical tool rather than as a country-specific intervention, while drawing on country-level examples to illustrate variation in context, implementation, and early outcomes.

The scope of the case study covers the full DRA process, including assessment design, data collection and analysis methods, stakeholder engagement, and the production and dissemination of findings. It considers how the assessment was adapted to different national research systems, and how these contextual differences shaped both the process and the type of evidence generated.

Given that the DRA was implemented for the first time, the case study does not attempt to assess long-term outcomes or attribution. Instead, it focuses on early signals of influence, perceived usefulness, and conditions that may enable or constrain future uptake and use of findings. As such, the case study does not assess the overall performance of national research systems, nor does it compare countries against one another. Its focus is on understanding how the DRA functions as an assessment approach, what it produces, and how it may contribute to improved decision-making within research funding and capacity strengthening efforts.

2. Context: DRA

The Doing Research programme is a flagship global 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: the Doing Research Assessment (DRA). 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, who receive approximately EUR 50,000 to 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 the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) through the Pôle clermontois de développement international (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 policy outcomes.

3. Evaluation Questions for the Programme

- To what extent do the DRA studies respond to country-specific research system needs and priorities?
- To what degree have the DRAs generated actionable insights and comparative data on national research systems?
- What factors have facilitated or constrained implementation and uptake of DRA findings in participating countries?
- What changes, if any, can be observed in how national or regional stakeholders understand, measure, or strengthen research systems as a result of DRA findings?
- What mechanisms exist (or are emerging) to ensure the continued use and institutionalization of DRA findings and approaches?

4. Methodology

4.1 Methods

Document Review: A systematic desk review was conducted of programme documents, including: call for proposals, gender review reports, toolkits, and mentor reports. Using a thematic coding matrix, the review synthesized evidence on outputs, outcomes, and underlying assumptions.

Key Informant Interviews (KII): The team conducted 7 semi-structured interviews with DRA stakeholders. Interviews were tailored to the initiative's logic and outcome areas, and conducted in French.

Small Group Discussions (SGDs): The team conducted four small group discussions with a total of 10 programme participants. The team used a Most Significant Change approach to guide SGDs, centering participants' own accounts of meaningful change associated with the programme. Participants were invited to share concrete stories of change and to collectively reflect on why certain changes were considered more significant than others. This process generated qualitative evidence not only of what changed, but also of the values, priorities, and pathways through which change was understood and experienced by those involved.

Table 1. Evaluation Sample - Stakeholder type

Program	GDN Staff	Mentors	Grantees	Donor	Total Stakeholders
DRA	2	3	12	2	19

5. Findings

EQ: To what extent do the DRA studies respond to country-specific research system needs and priorities?

The DRA approach was highly relevant to national research system needs: addressing critical gaps in evidence, system understanding, and stakeholder coordination. However, relevance varied depending on institutional maturity and political environment.

Across all participating countries, interviewees emphasized that before the DRA there was no coherent picture of how their national research systems functioned. One researcher explained, "we talk about the research system, but before this, we had no map and no indicators to understand it." Stakeholders repeatedly noted that ministries, universities, and agencies operated with limited coordination, fragmented information, and inconsistent assumptions. As a result, both national and international funders lacked reliable evidence to guide strategic investment decisions in research systems.

Although technically demanding, the methodology allowed researchers to adapt indicators, restructure survey instruments, and contextualize analysis. One team member described it as a "heavy document, yes, but adaptable. We could adjust without breaking the logic." This adaptability enabled countries to align DRA outputs with national priorities, including youth employment, governance reforms, research infrastructure gaps, and innovation policy needs. The DRA's capacity to consolidate diverse data sources into a unified analytical framework made it particularly relevant as a system-level diagnostic tool. As one participant noted, "after the DRA, we finally had a shared language to describe the system." This evidence base provided clarity not only for researchers, but also for policymakers who had previously relied on partial or informal information.

While the DRA was widely perceived as relevant, the nature of its added value differed depending on the maturity of existing research governance systems. In contexts where ministries or national research bodies already possessed partial data, or prior diagnostic exercises, the DRA was viewed less as a foundational mapping tool and more as a consolidation and validation mechanism. In such cases, stakeholders emphasized that its relevance depended on its ability to complement, rather than duplicate, existing frameworks. By contrast, in contexts where research system data were fragmented or largely absent, the DRA filled a fundamental baseline gap and was perceived as directly responsive to unmet national needs.

However, relevance was shaped by national political and institutional contexts. In politically repressive environments, institutional secrecy and fear of repercussions limited stakeholder willingness to share information. One researcher stated that "some institutions refused completely. They were afraid to talk about their research practices." These constraints reduced data coverage and limited the assessment's ability to inform wider national debates. Institutional maturity also affected relevance. Teams embedded in well-established research centers found it easier to position the DRA within existing strategic conversations, while less anchored teams struggled to link findings to national or

institutional priorities. As summarized by a programme stakeholder, “the competence of the team is everything. If the team is not coherent, the DRA will not land.” Overall, the DRA filled a critical evidence gap when national environments were open, institutions engaged, and teams well coordinated.

Coherence between the DRA model and national institutional ecosystems varied widely and depended on team composition, institutional anchoring, and alignment with national priorities. Where coherence was strong, implementation was smoother and influence greater.

Teams embedded in established research centers with administrative support and interdisciplinary expertise reported smoother implementation. One researcher explained that “our institution supported us with logistics and credibility. That made stakeholders willing to speak with us.” Conversely, teams lacking institutional backing faced administrative delays, limited stakeholder access, and unclear internal roles. As one programme stakeholder noted, “if the team is not coherent, it becomes a monitoring exercise, not a research project.”

In practice, this lack of coherence manifested in fragmented roles, uneven methodological ownership, and limited collective analysis. Rather than functioning as a coordinated research team engaging critically with the framework, some teams defaulted to dividing tasks in a procedural way, focusing on data collection templates and reporting requirements without deeper interrogation of findings. This reduced space for reflexive analysis, triangulation, and interpretation, and constrained the ability to adapt the framework to context. As a result, the process risked becoming compliance-driven, with an emphasis on completing indicators and deliverables, rather than generating contextually grounded insights and contributing to national research system learning.

Methodological coherence also posed challenges. While the DRA framework is comprehensive by design, not all countries had data systems capable of informing required indicators. As one team noted, “we could not find the indicators. They simply do not exist here.” This mismatch occasionally slowed progress and required adaptation to primary data collection.

EQ: To what degree have the DRAs generated actionable insights and comparative data on national research systems?

The DRA generated valuable systemic insights, producing evidence that has begun to inform national conversations and policy-oriented discussions. However, uptake remains contingent on political openness, institutional readiness, and dissemination strategies.

The DRA produced novel datasets, mappings, and analyses that highlighted strengths and weaknesses across governance, funding, capacity, and enabling environment indicators. In fact, one researcher noted that, “for the first time, we have data to show the weaknesses and strengths of our system, not just assumptions.” Dissemination events brought together ministries, agencies, universities, donors, and civil society actors,

creating rare spaces for cross-sector dialogue. As one team member reported, “the discussions were intense. People finally saw how disconnected our institutions are.”

While the DRA framework was designed to enable cross-country comparison through standardized dimensions and indicators, evidence of systematic benchmarking across contexts remains limited at this stage. Interviewees emphasized the value of the common structure for organizing national data. However, few concrete examples were provided of cross-country comparisons actively shaping national policy decisions. At the same time, comparability is not only intended across countries, but also over time within the same country. The framework creates a baseline that can, in principle, support longitudinal analysis of changes in national research systems, provided that DRAs are repeated or updated. This temporal dimension was recognized by some stakeholders as a potential strength, though it has not yet been operationalized in most contexts. As such, comparability currently functions primarily as a structural feature of the design, establishing the conditions for future benchmarking rather than serving as a fully leveraged policy tool. Its value is expected to increase as a larger number of DRAs are completed across countries and, over time, within countries, enabling more robust cross-country and longitudinal analysis to inform policy dialogue and strategic decision-making.

At the national level, decision-makers expressed interest in using the findings to inform reforms or institutional planning, particularly where the DRA quantified issues that were previously acknowledged. One stakeholder remarked that, “this report explains why our system struggles. It connects the dots.” The data also suggests that the pathway from diagnostic insight to concrete reform requires an additional translation step. While the DRA clarified system-level bottlenecks and quantified previous concerns, structured mechanisms to prioritize recommendations, assign responsibility, and integrate findings into formal planning processes depended heavily on context, including the level of participation of ministerial representatives and the experience of the national team in engaging policy processes. In settings where government actors were closely involved and teams had stronger policy engagement capacity, there were clearer entry points for uptake. Conversely, where such conditions were limited, follow-up processes were less defined, and actionability remained largely discursive rather than programmatic.

Political and institutional constraints further shaped uptake. In restrictive environments, dissemination was limited and policymakers avoided engaging with findings perceived as sensitive. As one researcher explained, “we were told to be careful. They [policymakers] did not want these results discussed publicly.” Thus, influence remained largely within academic and research communities.

A structural absence of research system data and information infrastructure shaped both the relevance and the limits of DRA implementation and uptake.

Research teams consistently reported that the lack of basic, reliable, data was not an incidental challenge but a defining characteristic of national research systems. Ministries and public institutions often lacked inventories of researchers, research units, or funding flows, forcing DRA teams to reconstruct foundational datasets before analysis could begin.

In one country, researchers initially assumed that the ministry would provide a list of research actors, only to discover that "this information simply did not exist." This required the team to build the database themselves. Similar experiences were reported in another country, where teams noted that the DRA framework presupposed secondary data that was "unavailable or extremely limited," complicating indicator measurement and comparability. In another country, participants described data access as "rare and difficult," emphasizing that social science research had long been neglected in national data systems. These constraints had two effects. First, they reinforced the relevance of the DRA as a first-order diagnostic. As one researcher put it, "what changed was not the system itself, but awareness of how fragmented it is." Second, they limited the immediate actionability of findings, particularly in politically sensitive environments wherein data sharing itself was perceived as risky. In another country, a participant explained that some institutions "refused completely to share information, out of fear," narrowing the scope of analysis. Rather than weakening the DRA's contribution, these findings point to a structural insight: in many contexts, the DRA is operating in the absence of a functioning research information system. Its value therefore lies less in performance monitoring and more in establishing a baseline, surfacing blind spots, and making visible the need for institutionalized data infrastructures as a prerequisite for sustained reform.

At the same time, more structured contexts illustrate a different configuration of this challenge. In Tunisia, for example, existing ministerial data systems meant that information on the research system was already available, albeit fragmented and not always easily accessible or consolidated. In this setting, the DRA did not primarily serve to reconstruct missing data, but rather to reorganize, interpret, and complement existing datasets, and to bring them into a more integrated analytical framework. As one stakeholder noted, the exercise helped generate "a clear picture of the strengths and weaknesses of our research ecosystem" and supported ongoing policy reflection. This contrast points to a structural insight: the DRA operates across a spectrum of data environments. In lower-capacity systems, its value lies in establishing a baseline and making the absence of data visible. In more structured systems, its added value shifts toward synthesis, interpretation, and informing policy dialogue. Across both contexts, however, the need for institutionalized, accessible, and regularly updated research information systems remains a prerequisite for sustained reform.

EQ: What factors have facilitated or constrained implementation and uptake of DRA findings in participating countries?

Mentorship quality and continuity emerged as a decisive factor shaping implementation outcomes, methodological coherence, and team confidence (rather than serving as a peripheral support function).

While the DRA methodology was widely described as technically demanding, teams' ability to operationalize it depended heavily on the nature of the mentorship received. The interview transcripts show that mentorship was not merely a form of technical assistance, but a core mechanism for translating a complex framework into contextually grounded analysis. Where mentorship was stable, context-aware, and had in-person kick-off meetings, teams reported more methodological coherence and greater confidence. In two countries, participants emphasized that mentors who understood both the national

context and the logic of the DRA helped teams "sharpen the analysis" and move beyond compliance toward ownership. Mentors themselves highlighted that adopting a non-hierarchical and supportive posture was critical to acceptance, noting "you have to be there to help, not to control."

Conversely, where mentorship was disrupted or misaligned, progress stalled. In one country, the loss of a mentor led to the loss of an entire year of work (as the project could not resume effectively without a new mentor, and finding one was difficult). In another country, while the mentor relationship was described as positive on a human level, the focus on quantitative methods from the mentor led to a challenging learning curve.

Still, across all contexts, teams linked effective mentorship to increased analytical rigor, improved use of quantitative methods, and greater confidence in engaging stakeholders. One mentor observed that teams who initially resisted statistical approaches later "appreciated how numbers allowed them to demonstrate what they had long observed intuitively." This shift contributed not only to better outputs, but also to teams' professional credibility. Overall, mentorship emerges as a structural component of the DRA model, rather than an add-on.

The DRA contributed to strengthening research teams' methodological capacity, project management skills, and analytical rigor, enhancing their ability to undertake complex national studies. However, capacity gains varied according to baseline skills, team cohesion, and the intensity of support required.

The DRA imposed methodological and analytical demands that exceeded what many teams had previously encountered. Researchers described steep learning curves in survey design, sampling, indicator development, political economy analysis, stakeholder mapping, and mixed-methods research. One team reflected that "this was the first time we conducted a study of this complexity. We had to learn everything, from writing surveys to cleaning datasets." Continuous mentoring and backstopping therefore played a critical role in enabling teams to operationalize the methodology. Mentors helped interpret technical requirements, refine conceptual models, troubleshoot fieldwork challenges, and strengthen analytical coherence. As one participant explained, "without the mentor, we could not have understood how to operationalize the indicators. It changed how we think about research."

Beyond technical skills, teams reported improvements in managerial and organizational capacities. Researchers described learning how to plan extended research cycles, develop workplans, negotiate institutional access, and manage budgets. One team member noted that "before, we worked individually. The DRA forced us to work as a real research team." These managerial competencies represent one of the programme's most durable contributions, supporting future research beyond the DRA itself.

Nevertheless, variation across teams was significant. Teams with mismatched expertise, coordination challenges, or limited institutional backing required more intensive external support. In practice, mismatched expertise often meant that teams lacked a balanced mix of skills across quantitative analysis, qualitative research, and policy engagement, making it difficult to apply the full methodological framework without external guidance. Coordination challenges were reflected in unclear division of roles, uneven engagement

across team members, and difficulties maintaining momentum over extended research cycles.

These differences were also shaped by how teams were constituted. In some cases, teams were pre-existing research groups with established working relationships and institutional anchoring, which facilitated coordination and collective problem-solving. In others, teams were assembled specifically for the DRA, requiring members to build trust, clarify roles, and align working methods while simultaneously delivering a complex study. This influenced how quickly teams became operational and how effectively they navigated methodological and logistical challenges. In some cases, members lacked the statistical or analytical capacity to apply the methodology independently, while others faced logistical delays or limited availability of team members.

Administrative and contextual conditions further shaped implementation trajectories. Several teams reported delays in funding disbursement, administrative bottlenecks, and challenges in securing timely institutional approvals. In contexts where formal institutional endorsement was weak, researchers encountered hesitation or refusal from ministries and agencies to share information, slowing fieldwork and limiting indicator measurement. These factors affected timelines, data completeness, and the feasibility of applying the full DRA framework as designed.

Despite these constraints, most participants emphasized that the DRA strengthened their professional profiles. Researchers highlighted increased confidence, enhanced credibility, and improved competitiveness for future research opportunities. As one team stated, “we can say we managed a national assessment. That changes everything for our careers.”

EQ: What changes, if any, can be observed in how national or regional stakeholders understand, measure, or strengthen research systems as a result of DRA findings?

The DRA functioned not only as a diagnostic tool, but as a legitimacy-building mechanism that repositioned social science research and national teams within policy and institutional arenas.

Participation in the DRA altered how national research teams (and social science research itself) were perceived by institutional actors. Beyond producing data, the process enabled teams to emerge as reference points for understanding national research systems, often for the first time. Several teams explicitly framed their engagement as an opportunity to move from fragmented or marginal positioning, to recognized interlocutors for ministries, funders, and national agencies. Researchers likewise described that prior to the DRA, social science research was poorly understood as a system, even where research activity existed. One participant noted that “research itself was not unknown, but the system, the cycle, and how it functions, was not clearly understood.” The DRA gave teams a mandate and a language to speak about that system with authority.

Beyond legitimizing teams, the DRA appears to have shifted how stakeholders conceptualize research systems themselves. Rather than viewing research as a collection

of isolated projects or individual scholars, the framework encouraged analysis of governance structures, funding flows, institutional linkages, and enabling environments as interdependent components. In several contexts, interviewees described this as the first time research was examined as a structured system, with measurable dimensions. While formal monitoring systems have not yet been institutionalized in most cases, the introduction of indicator-based thinking marked an important shift toward systemic measurement.

In one country, a researcher explained that their primary expectation was to become "the focal team that institutions would come to when they want to understand how social science research is structured." In other countries, teams highlighted that the DRA enabled engagement with ministries responsible for higher education and research, shifting their role from observers to contributors in national debates. This legitimacy effect was particularly visible during dissemination. Even where concrete policy uptake remained uncertain, teams reported increased visibility, media attention, and recognition by senior officials. In one country, a researcher emphasized that the dissemination workshop was attended by a senior ministry representative and therefore, "raised our profile nationally and made our institution visible to actors who had never engaged with us before." In another instance, participants described the DRA as "a first" for social sciences, noting that authorities and stakeholders expressed interest simply because the exercise treated social science research as a system worthy of evaluation.

These shifts reflect early relational forms of impact, positioning national teams as credible system analysts within institutional arenas. While formal policy change remains constrained, this repositioning may serve as a precondition for later uptake and institutionalization. At this stage, the DRA's influence is primarily relational, conceptual, and professional. It has strengthened researchers' capacity to apply a systemic lens to research ecosystems and to engage in evidence-based dialogue: reinforcing their credibility within institutional conversations. Observable impacts remain concentrated at the level of awareness and positioning, rather than measurable structural reform. Given the complexity and political nature of research system transformation, deeper institutional change will likely require sustained engagement and monitoring, beyond the initial assessment cycle.

These shifts reflect early relational forms of impact, positioning national teams as credible system analysts within institutional arenas. Given that most DRAs have only recently concluded or are still ongoing, it is too early to assess policy or institutional change. At this stage, the DRA's influence is primarily relational, conceptual, and professional. It has strengthened researchers' capacity to apply a systemic lens to research ecosystems and to engage in evidence-based dialogue, reinforcing their credibility within institutional conversations. Observable impacts are therefore concentrated at the level of awareness, dialogue, and positioning, rather than structural reform. Given the complexity and political nature of research system transformation, deeper institutional change is likely to emerge over a longer time horizon and will require sustained engagement, follow-up processes, and continued monitoring beyond the initial assessment cycle.

EQ: What mechanisms exist (or are emerging) to ensure the continued use and institutionalization of DRA findings and approaches?

Early signs of sustainability emerged where institutional ownership and government interest were aligned. However, most countries require continued support to preserve momentum.

Sustainability depends on whether institutions and governments perceive the DRA as valuable and actionable. Many researchers expressed interest in updating indicators or applying the methodology to new questions. One participant stated, “this must not be a one-time study. The country needs regular assessments.” Participants also expressed interest in adapting the methodology for other thematic domains or sharing lessons with neighboring countries, suggesting potential pathways for horizontal diffusion beyond the original assessment cycle.

At present, however, most DRAs in Africa have been funded through international donor support. While this has enabled implementation, it raises questions about long-term sustainability. Sustained use of the DRA would likely require increased domestic financing and institutional integration, allowing governments and national institutions to take ownership of repeat assessments and data systems over time.

Capacity to sustain the DRA independently therefore varies. Some institutions lack the financial resources, data infrastructure, or administrative systems required for continuation. Others face political barriers to openly addressing system weaknesses.

In a limited number of contexts, stakeholders also identified potential follow-up mechanisms, including integrating selected indicators into national planning cycles, assigning technical units to periodically review findings, or monitoring progress on priority recommendations. While these arrangements remain informal and uneven, they suggest that the DRA is beginning to shift from a standalone assessment toward a more iterative process in some settings.

A notable example emerged where a ministry expressed interest in institutionalizing the DRA, viewing it as a strategic input for national planning. As one team explained, “they asked us how to make the DRA permanent. They want to use the indicators.” This case illustrates that sustainability becomes more feasible when political alignment, institutional readiness, and national priorities converge.

6. Cross-Cutting Limitations and Design Tensions

The implementation of the DRA revealed several structural tensions between the standardized design of the framework and the realities of national research environments. While the methodology is intended to enable comparability and systemic analysis, it presupposes the availability of secondary data, administrative records, and baseline indicators that, in many contexts, did not exist. Research teams frequently reported that ministries lacked inventories of researchers, funding flows, or institutional performance metrics, requiring them to reconstruct foundational datasets before analysis could begin. This increased the workload and, in some cases, limited the feasibility of fully operationalizing all intended indicators. At the same time, teams navigated a balance between adhering closely to the methodological framework as designed and adapting it to fit national realities. Several teams expressed a strong sense of responsibility to deliver on the original methodological expectations, which at times constrained their willingness to deviate from prescribed indicators or approaches, even where adaptation may have been more appropriate. While flexibility was encouraged, this balance was not always easy to operationalize in practice.

From a programmatic perspective, the absence of data and functioning research information systems constitutes a finding in its own right. Rather than solely representing a limitation of the methodology, these gaps reveal structural weaknesses in national research systems and reinforce the relevance of the DRA as a diagnostic tool. At a more operational level, the breadth and technical expectations of the indicator framework often exceeded national data realities. Certain quantitative dimensions proved difficult to measure due to incomplete records or fragmented information systems. While teams adapted creatively, this mismatch highlights a core design challenge: the DRA aspires to systematic measurement across countries, yet operates in environments where research information systems remain underdeveloped.

Methodological complexity also posed challenges. Several teams described steep learning curves in statistical analysis, survey design, and mixed-methods integration. Although mentoring and backstopping mitigated these challenges, some components remained difficult to operationalize without sustained technical guidance.

The model's reliance on mentorship continuity emerged as a vulnerability. In one context, a change in mentor led to a prolonged interruption in technical guidance, resulting in a significant delay before implementation regained momentum. This illustrates that the effectiveness of the DRA model depends on stable, context-aware mentoring relationships. Where mentoring structures are informal or insufficiently institutionalized, the system becomes sensitive to personnel changes.

At the same time, mentoring did not operate in isolation. Evidence suggests that GDN's technical team played an important complementary role, providing methodological backstopping, facilitating communication, and, in some cases, reactivating engagement when interactions between mentors and teams stalled. However, this also introduces an additional layer of dependency. In contexts where coordination within GDN was disrupted, for example due to staff turnover, exchanges with national teams slowed or were temporarily interrupted.

Finally, the DRA's theory of change assumes that national teams will be able to leverage both the research produced and their association with GDN to stimulate broader dialogue among national stakeholders. In practice, this assumption did not hold uniformly. In politically sensitive environments, dissemination was constrained and findings could not always be discussed publicly. In such cases, engagement remained largely within research communities, rather than extending fully into policy arenas. Moreover, even in less constrained contexts, not all teams actively pursued post-assessment engagement. In some instances, teams transitioned quickly to other projects, limiting the extent to which findings were used to convene stakeholders or sustain dialogue. This suggests that the translation of evidence into national debate depends not only on context, but also on the incentives, capacities, and positioning of research teams to carry this role forward.

This does not negate the analytical value of the assessment, but it highlights the importance of both political context and post-assessment engagement strategies in determining whether evidence can translate into broader institutional dialogue. These limitations do not undermine the relevance of the DRA. Rather, they clarify the conditions under which the model is most effective and point to areas where design refinements, particularly around data realism, mentorship formalization, political risk navigation, and structured follow-up for dissemination and engagement, could strengthen future iterations.

7. Lessons Learned

National research system diagnostics require both technical rigor and political navigation. The DRA demonstrated that methodological strength alone cannot guarantee high-quality results, unless teams can also navigate complex political sensitivities, institutional dynamics, and stakeholder reluctance. Researchers repeatedly faced environments where transparency was limited and institutional actors feared exposure: making access and candor difficult. Successful teams therefore combined analytical competence with diplomacy, relationship-building, and adaptive strategies to safeguard data quality while minimizing political risk.

Standardized frameworks must be calibrated to data realities. The DRA's structured indicator framework enabled cross-country comparability, but implementation revealed

that many national research systems lack the secondary data required to populate standardized metrics. Future iterations should incorporate phased indicator application, flexible data thresholds, or preparatory data-mapping exercises in order to avoid overburdening teams and to ensure realistic measurement expectations.

Research capacity was most effective with structured guidance and iterative learning. Teams emphasized that they would not have been able to fully operationalize the DRA without continuous mentoring, backstopping, and structured peer review. The iterative support model allowed teams to refine indicators, adjust methodological choices, and progressively strengthen analytical coherence. This indicates that capacity strengthening is most effective when it follows a scaffolded model: providing support at critical junctures, while gradually shifting decision-making to national teams.

Team composition determines success more than any other factor. The degree of cohesion, complementarity, and commitment within national teams was a major determinant of performance. Teams with coherent internal coordination, clear leadership, and balanced expertise (statistics, qualitative methods, management, etc.) were able to absorb the methodology, manage complexity, and maintain momentum. Where teams lacked these characteristics, the project became slower, more administratively burdensome, and more dependent on external support. This underscores the centrality of team design in delivering high-impact research.

The DRA is most influential when aligned with national priorities. Countries where the DRA findings resonated with ongoing debates, such as research governance reform, higher education strategy, or innovation policy, saw higher engagement from ministries and research councils. Alignment created natural entry points for evidence uptake, enabling dialogue rather than resistance. Conversely, when national agendas were unclear or politically sensitive, opportunities for influence were limited: reinforcing that systemic assessments must be tightly coupled with national reform windows.

Dissemination is not optional: it is foundational to impact. Dissemination events brought stakeholders together, created visibility for the findings, and positioned teams as credible intermediaries in national research systems. When dissemination was constrained by political sensitivities, the assessment's influence remained confined to academic circles and could not shape public or policy discourse. This demonstrates that dissemination is not a downstream activity, but a strategic component of the assessment that requires specific planning, resources, and institutional support.

Sustainability requires institutional anchoring, not individual commitment. While many researchers expressed enthusiasm to continue updating indicators and applying the DRA, sustainability depended heavily on whether institutions and ministries perceived long-term value. The one country where a ministry expressed interest in institutionalizing the DRA illustrates how sustainability becomes viable when political demand and

organizational alignment converge. Without these anchors, capacity gains risk dissipating once funding ends, suggesting that sustainability strategies must be integrated from the beginning.

GDN's intermediary role enables structured, yet context-sensitive, system diagnostics. The DRA illustrates GDN's added value as an intermediary actor capable of bridging global methodological standards with local institutional realities. Through mentoring coordination, and comparative framing, GDN facilitates national ownership (while maintaining cross-country coherence). This positioning allows GDN to support systemic capacity strengthening without directly driving reform, reinforcing its role as a convenor and knowledge broker, rather than a policy implementer.

8. Recommendations

Strengthen team selection and ensure balanced expertise for future DRAs. Future cycles should adopt clearer and more structured criteria for team composition, ensuring the presence of complementary skills in statistical analysis, qualitative analysis, project coordination, and institutional engagement. Balanced expertise would reduce implementation bottlenecks, minimize reliance on external technical support, and increase teams' ability to independently manage complex analytical tasks. Establishing explicit competency requirements at the selection stage would enhance coherence, improve methodological consistency, and increase the credibility and usability of findings.

Enhance methodological preparation at the outset to support consistent execution. Given the technical and analytical complexity of the DRA, teams would benefit from a more robust preparatory phase that includes modular training, worked examples, standardized templates, and peer-learning exchanges. Early methodological reinforcement would allow teams to internalize the logic of the framework before fieldwork begins, reducing confusion and improving data quality. Structured onboarding would also help equalize capacity levels across countries, contributing to more comparable and reliable outputs across the programme.

Expand and formalize the mentor role to strengthen strategic and operational support. The programme should establish clearer guidelines for mentor engagement, including expectations around frequency of interaction, deliverables review, escalation pathways, and support in navigating political or institutional constraints. Mentors should be positioned not only as technical advisors, but also as strategic partners who support coherence, prioritization, and decision-making throughout implementation. A more formalized mentoring framework would reduce variability in support quality and strengthen the overall effectiveness of the capacity-building model.

Provide structured dissemination support to enhance policy engagement and visibility. Standardized dissemination packages such as policy brief templates, presentation decks, infographics, media kits, and facilitation guides would support teams in translating findings into accessible and policy-relevant formats. Strengthened communication tools would also enable teams to engage a broader range of stakeholders beyond academia, including ministries, donors, and civil society actors. As dissemination is directly linked to uptake and influence, targeted support in this area would enhance the DRA's impact.

Institutionalize the DRA through early and sustained engagement with ministries and research councils. When political interest exists, GDN should support governments in integrating DRA indicators into national planning processes, quality assurance mechanisms, or research evaluation frameworks, early on. Anchoring the DRA within existing governance structures would increase continuity, legitimacy, and long-term

value. Even in contexts with limited readiness, early dialogue with ministries and research councils can lay the foundation for future institutional adoption and strengthen cross-sector collaboration.

Create a DRA community of practice to facilitate cross-country learning and peer support. Establishing a structured platform for periodic virtual exchanges, peer reviews, troubleshooting sessions, and joint training would allow teams to share lessons learned, address common challenges, and benefit from diverse implementation contexts. This approach would reduce duplication of effort, promote methodological harmonization, and strengthen collective capacity across participating countries. A community of practice would also reinforce regional (or wider) duplication by providing teams with continued access to peer expertise beyond the life of individual grants.

Integrate sustainability planning from the earliest stages of implementation. Teams should be encouraged to develop sustainability plans that identify potential national partners, future funding pathways, and mechanisms for updating indicators after project completion. Providing practical tools such as funding landscape analyses, partnership agreement templates, and guidance on engaging ministries, would help teams transition from one-off assessments to systemic implementation. Early sustainability planning would also increase the likelihood that DRA findings remain relevant, actionable, and influential over the long term.