

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

Case Study: Institutional Research
Capacity Building (Volet 1)

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Acronyms

AFD Agence Française de Développement

DRA Doing Research Assessments

FGD Focus Group Discussion

GDN Global Development Network

IDRC International Development Research Centre

IRCB Institutional Research Capacity Building

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 and in-depth examination of the IRCB Volet 1 programme, as one component of GDN's broader portfolio in Francophone Africa. The case study aims to assess the effectiveness of the grant in strengthening universities' research and management capacities. Specifically, the case study seeks to:

- Assess the extent to which the initiative has achieved its intended outcomes;
- Examine the evidence of the initiative's contribution to strengthening research capacity within universities;
- Analyse how strengthened research capacity has supported universities' ability to engage in and influence development debates in the countries where the initiative operates; and
- Identify key mechanisms through which the initiative contributed to these outcomes.

The case study is intended to serve as a learning function for GDN and its partners, offering concrete insights that can inform adaptation, coherence, and strategic positioning of think tank support within a multi-initiative, research capacity strengthening, framework.

Scope

The scope of this case study is limited to the IRCB Volet 1 programme, with a specific focus on its implementation during the evaluation period from 2021 to 2025. The analysis concentrates on the extent to which the initiative achieved its intended outcomes in strengthening research capacity within universities, rather than attempting to assess long-term policy change or broader system-level effects.

The case study will:

- Focus on universities supported under IRCB Volet 1, examining how the programme contributed to strengthening institutional research and management capacities, including research planning, implementation, and coordination.
- Assess evidence of how strengthened research capacity enabled universities to engage more effectively in development debates at national and regional levels.

2. Context: IRCB Volet 1

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 research 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 up to a maximum of EUR 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 in Rwanda (2022), during which they presented, discussed, and challenged their proposed strategies in dialogue with peers and programme mentors. A central objective of the workshop was to support teams in clarifying their institutional capacity-building needs and refining their project logic so that proposals were grounded in real institutional priorities. Through collective review and feedback, teams reworked the structure,

coherence, and justification of their project content. 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 2022 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.

3. Evaluation Questions for the Program

- To what extent has the grant effectively supported research institutions to strengthen their managerial and financial management capacities?
- To what extent has the grant enabled participating institutions to independently plan, manage, and implement major research activities, including large research projects and conferences?
- To what extent have supported institutions strengthened their ability to define their own research agendas, identify institutional priorities, and design research programmes without reliance on externally driven agendas?

4. Methodology

4.1 Methods

Document Review: A systematic desk review was conducted of programme documents, including: evidence fairs documents, institutional capacity-building plans, progress reports, mentoring and training materials, mentoring reports, and final reports. Using a thematic coding matrix, the review synthesized evidence on outputs, outcomes, and underlying assumptions.

Key Informant Interviews (KII): The team conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with Savoir Sahel 2 stakeholders, including grantees, GDN staff, and donors. Interviews were tailored to the initiative's logic and outcome areas, and were conducted in French.

Table 1. Evaluation Sample - Stakeholder type

Program	GDN Staff	Mentors	Grantees	Donor	Total Stakeholders
IRCB - Volet 1	1	4	9	1	15

5. Findings

EQ: To what extent has the grant effectively supported research institutions to strengthen their managerial and financial management capacities?

The initiative strengthened core managerial and research management capacities across all participating institutions, though full autonomy in independently designing, planning, and implementing research agendas remains uneven.

Evidence across participating institutions demonstrates improvements in managerial and research management capacities. Institutions introduced new coordination mechanisms, clarified internal roles, and adopted more structured processes for planning, budgeting, and tracking activities. In one institution, for example, the team reshaped financial governance systems by establishing dedicated project bank accounts, introducing dual-signature controls, and implementing quarterly narrative and financial reporting, all supported by newly trained finance staff. As one respondent explained:

"Previously, funding was paid into the university's general account. Now each project has a dedicated account with two signatories... we recruited a project finance and administration officer, developed a dashboard linking activities and budget, and produced quarterly narrative and financial reports. This is a major shift in mindset and governance."

In other contexts, institutions adopted standardized Terms of Reference for activities, new planning templates, and clearer reporting lines between administrative and research units. In one case, new “technical sheets” were institutionalized for project monitoring, with both senior and junior researchers trained in their use.

Additional evidence points to improvements in the quality of project design, planning, and monitoring. Project workplans, budgets, and risk management practices became more systematic, and mentors observed notable gains in project management skills. In several contexts, institutions independently planned and implemented major research activities, including national and regional conferences, scientific symposia, and multi-actor dissemination events. While technical mentoring remained important for quality assurance, institutions increasingly demonstrated the ability to manage complex activities autonomously, particularly in logistics, budgeting, stakeholder coordination, and delivery. One mentor stated:

“They significantly improved their project design and management methodology. Training about activities, objectives, and indicators strengthened their skills. Through this program, they learned how to design projects in a donor-aligned way.”

Administrative capacity was also strengthened. Accounting assistants were trained in research budgeting and financial management and in several institutions, administrative and technical staff such as secretaries, IT personnel, and technicians were included in capacity-building efforts for the first time. These changes contributed to clearer internal procedures, improved coordination between academic and administrative staff, and more efficient implementation of activities.

Despite these advances, institutional autonomy in developing and implementing research agendas varied considerably. While some laboratories demonstrated increasing confidence and independence in planning and managing research activities, others continued to rely heavily on external guidance for methodological framing, activity sequencing, and monitoring of quality and impact. As one mentor noted:

“Some didn’t really know what they had to do, or how to do it. Some members did not even know what an indicator was, so it was a big learning experience for them. The training on project development and monitoring really helped, but they still need guidance in some areas.”

A mentor similarly observed that although project management skills grew, strategic and agenda-setting decisions often remained externally supported. These differences reflect varying starting points across institutions, particularly in relation to prior experience with donor-funded research and the strength of existing internal systems.

Persistent structural and contextual constraints limited the depth and pace of institutional strengthening.

Structural barriers were common across institutions and often slowed implementation or limited the full uptake of new practices. Respondents highlighted “many administrative bottlenecks within the faculty that hindered smooth project implementation,” particularly around fund disbursement procedures and the “lack of a dedicated project management unit. In response, the grantee introduced detailed Terms of Reference for each activity to improve communication with the administration, and over time, the university director signed official decrees to facilitate better governance of research”. This experience illustrates how the programme’s demands exposed institutional weaknesses, but also provided a push for reform. ral planned training sessions with international trainers had to be postponed. Such contextual shocks limited the ability of institutions to fully implement planned activities and slowed capacity development.

Limited staffing and over-reliance on a small number of individuals also emerged as cross-cutting constraints. In multiple institutions, directors or project coordinators were responsible for both scientific and administrative management, in addition to their academic duties. A mentor observed that, at first, the institute director “dictated everything and then delegated everything to his doctoral students.” Although it was noted that over time, the project was distributed amongst more leadership, the dependence on a few key individuals increased vulnerability to turnover, burnout, and competing commitments. In addition, leadership engagement itself was uneven: in contexts where directors and senior management actively supported the programme, progress was faster and more strategic. But, where leadership was disengaged or frequently changing, internal decision-making slowed and ownership weakened.

Some other constraints were linked directly to programme design and implementation processes. Several respondents across three countries mentioned delays in GDN disbursements, which affected the planning and sequencing of activities. A researcher explained, “Disbursements were sometimes delayed, and we occasionally had to pre-finance activities while waiting for funds.” Others discussed the challenges of mentor alignment and availability. One respondent described a disruption in the continuity of mentorship during the later stages of the project, noting that regular exchanges had been established initially but did not continue through the project’s no-cost extension period. This shift reflects the fact that, in some cases, mentorship arrangements were tied to fixed contractual timelines that did not extend alongside project adjustments, particularly in contexts affected by external shocks. For example, in settings where implementation was significantly slowed due to insecurity or crisis, extensions were granted to project teams without a corresponding extension of mentor contracts, resulting in a transition toward more direct support from GDN during the final phase. In another case, a mentor reflected on how professional and cultural differences shaped expectations around visibility and gender representation, underscoring the importance of careful matching and orientation of mentors to institutional contexts.

EQ: To what extent has the grant enabled participating institutions to independently plan, manage, and implement major research activities, including large research projects and conferences?

Volet 1 enabled several universities to independently plan and deliver major research-related activities, particularly conferences, symposia, and flagship institutional initiatives.

Across Volet 1 institutions, there is consistent evidence that universities moved beyond smaller, fragmented, activities to independently plan and implement wider research-related initiatives. Institutions reported organising large-scale scientific events, including national and international symposia that brought together participants from ministries, universities, producer organisations, and regional research bodies. These events were conceived, financed, and delivered by the institutions themselves and were repeatedly cited as core programme achievements, rather than as externally driven or donor-led outputs. One university team described how Volet 1 resources enabled them to organise a complex international symposium alongside multiple complementary outputs, noting: “we developed a research guide, organized a symposium that gathered more than a hundred participants, we created a network of researchers, and set up the laboratory’s website.” Another institution similarly emphasised that the symposium was not only a visibility exercise, but a demanding managerial and logistical undertaking led internally: “the international symposium we organized led to the development of a network of researchers in the country who now collaborate on various research activities, and with articles that will soon to be published.”

In at least one case, the organisation of a major symposium served multiple institutional objectives simultaneously. It functioned as a platform for disseminating research findings, strengthening institutional visibility, formalising partnerships with national and regional actors, and positioning the institution within policy-relevant research debates. The ability to design and execute such events reflects a shift from ad hoc participation in externally organised activities, toward institution-led coordination and delivery of complex research engagements. Mentor accounts corroborate these findings. Mentors confirmed that institutions successfully planned and delivered major activities within agreed timelines, while retaining ownership over decisions related to content, sequencing, partnerships, and resource allocation. One mentor reflected that the “major flagship project was successfully implemented on time and they organized a colloquium that attracted many researchers and potential partners.”

Volet 1 strengthened institutional capacity to manage complex research activities, including budgeting, coordination, and reporting. This enabled universities to take on greater operational responsibility.

Institutions reported tangible improvements in research project management capacities, including more structured planning timelines, clearer internal coordination mechanisms, improved budgeting practices, and strengthened reporting systems. These capacities were directly linked by respondents to their ability to organise and deliver major research activities under Volet 1. Several institutions described managing multiple activities concurrently and coordinating across research, administrative, and communication functions, indicating an increased level of operational complexity compared to pre-programme practices.

Notably, some institutions reported adapting to GDN’s operational challenges, such as delayed disbursements, by temporarily pre-financing activities or reorganising workplans.

As one respondent explained: "GDN disbursements influenced our research activity planning timelines, so we sometimes pre-financed research while waiting for disbursements." While such adaptations point to constraints within GDN's programme, they also indicate increased managerial responsibility and confidence in handling operational risks. Rather than halting implementation, some institutions were able to manage disruptions to maintain momentum.

Mentors reinforced these accounts, noting that training and mentoring on proposal development, indicators, budgeting, and donor expectations contributed to institutions' growing ability to manage projects autonomously. In at least one case, institutional restructuring supported under Volet 1 enabled the creation of a new research laboratory that became eligible for, and successfully secured, national research funding via competitive calls. A mentor noted: "the university responded to a call for projects [...] which they obtained funding during the period. It was the laboratory structure that made this possible." Similarly, another university highlighted how managing a Volet 1 grant strengthened its credibility and confidence in engaging with larger funding opportunities stating that "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."

Despite these gains, administrative and management capacity remained uneven and, in some cases, fragile. Mentors and institutions noted that progress often depended heavily on a small number of motivated individuals rather than on fully institutionalised systems. In several cases, laboratory coordination relied on temporary staff or doctoral students, raising concerns about continuity once Volet 1 funding ended. As one mentor cautioned: "I'm not entirely sure that this is a sustainable arrangement [...] the gamble is that if the laboratory managed to gain sufficient visibility and secure funding, then the university would eventually provide permanent resources." More broadly, university-level administrative constraints, including rigid governance structures and staffing rules, limited the extent to which project-level management improvements could be embedded institution-wide.

Volet 1 positioned institutions to undertake larger research initiatives, but evidence of sustained and independent implementation at scale remains emerging, rather than fully realised.

There is strong evidence that Volet 1 functioned as a catalyst for institutional strengthening, enabling universities to transition from fragmented research teams toward more coherent structures capable of hosting larger initiatives. The establishment of new laboratories, development of methodological guides, creation of research networks, and organisation of major events, all signal increased readiness to plan, manage, and implement complex research activities.

At least one university used Volet 1 funding to consolidate previously fragmented teams into an interdisciplinary laboratory. As one institution explained: "Together, we decided to merge them into an interdisciplinary social sciences research laboratory... this structure is the one that received GDN funding." This institutional consolidation had concrete operational effects. Following the establishment of the laboratory, the institution independently organised scientific days, strengthened internal research governance, and became eligible for funding opportunities that were previously inaccessible. As a mentor

observed: "They managed to set up a laboratory and that was my main contribution during the refocusing phase... the existence of laboratories is a prerequisite for responding to national or international calls for projects."

As mentioned earlier, some institutions leveraged Volet 1 achievements to secure additional national funding aligned with their research agendas, suggesting that the programme strengthened institutional credibility and preparedness to engage in larger research initiatives beyond the grant itself. However, most examples of large-scale implementation either emerged toward the end of the Volet 1 period, or relied on follow-on funding. This made it difficult to attribute full independent delivery of major research programmes solely to Volet 1 support.

While Volet 1 contributed to meaningful institutional strengthening, structural, temporal, and contextual constraints shaped the scale, pace, and sustainability of independent research implementation.

Data across institutions indicates that, although Volet 1 enabled universities to plan and implement major research-related activities, these achievements were generally bounded in scope, with most independently implemented activities taking the form of national or sub-regional conferences, symposia, flagship studies, and the establishment of new research structures. While these represent important institutional gains, there is limited evidence that institutions moved, within the grant period, toward independently designing and delivering very large, multi-country research programmes. Where larger initiatives did emerge, they tended to do so toward the end of the funding cycle or through subsequent national or donor funding.

Several respondents and mentors emphasised that the two-year duration of Volet 1 constrained what could realistically be achieved. While the programme supported rapid progress in planning, structuring, and initial implementation, interviewees consistently noted that consolidating management systems, stabilising administrative roles, and repeatedly delivering complex research programmes would require a longer time horizon. As one mentor reflected, institutional strengthening was still at a "fragile" stage and dependent on continued momentum beyond the grant period.

Administrative depth also emerged as a persistent constraint. Although management practices improved, these gains were often unevenly institutionalised. In multiple institutions, project coordination and administrative functions relied heavily on a small number of individuals, such as directors, senior researchers, or doctoral students. This reliance increased vulnerability to turnover, competing academic demands, and burnout. Mentors expressed concern that, in the absence of permanent administrative positions or dedicated research management units, the sustainability of improved practices remained uncertain.

Broader (university-level) administrative constraints further shaped implementation outcomes. Rigid financial procedures, slow approval processes, and limited autonomy at faculty or laboratory level restricted how flexible institutions could be in managing funds and adapting workplans. In some cases, Volet 1 requirements exposed these institutional bottlenecks and prompted incremental reforms, however progress remained uneven and highly context-dependent.

Contextual shocks also affected implementation. Institutions operating in fragile or conflict-affected settings faced disruptions linked to insecurity, university strikes, and banking closures, which temporarily halted or delayed activities regardless of institutional readiness. In such contexts, even well-designed projects experienced interruptions that limited sequencing, coordination, and timely delivery. At the same time, evidence from at least one case highlights a high degree of institutional resilience: despite operating in a city affected by repeated episodes of armed conflict and occupation, the project team maintained communication, did not seek to reduce the scope or quality of deliverables, and ultimately completed the project, requesting only time extensions to accommodate disruptions.

Finally, mentoring quality and continuity influenced how effectively institutions navigated these constraints. Where mentoring was early, structured, and sustained, institutions were better able to adapt to challenges and translate flexible funding into coherent institutional gains. Conversely, delayed or inconsistent mentoring reduced the programme's ability to mitigate structural constraints and slowed progress toward institutional autonomy.

These findings suggest that Volet 1 was effective in initiating institutional strengthening and enabling universities to assume greater leadership in research implementation. They also point to a staged pathway of change for on-demand, small grant mechanisms, where early investments primarily support institutional structuring, capacity development, and initial research outputs, with larger-scale, multi-country leadership more likely to emerge over longer timeframes or through follow-on funding. Structural administrative constraints, short timeframes, contextual instability, and uneven institutionalisation of management functions limited the extent to which these early gains could be consolidated during the grant period. This highlights the importance of longer funding horizons, deeper administrative embedding, and sustained mentoring to translate initial capacity gains into durable and large-scale research leadership.

EQ: To what extent have supported institutions strengthened their ability to define their own research agendas, identify institutional priorities, and design research programmes without reliance upon externally driven agendas?

The programme contributed to the development of institutional research agendas and strengthened institutional identity and strategic positioning, though ownership and operationalization were uneven.

Across all participating contexts, the initiative supported institutions in articulating clearer research directions, defining thematic strengths, and developing strategic research documents. In one case, the establishment and consolidation of an interdisciplinary research center led to the development of the institution's first-ever strategic plan. A member explained:

"As the center began to structure itself, we felt the need to establish a long-term vision. The mentor helped us draft a strategic plan...with a five-year vision, defining the institution and research objectives and indicators which we are now starting to implement."

This strategic planning process represented a critical milestone in institutional identity formation and positioned the research team more clearly within national and regional research ecosystems. In other contexts, institutions adopted new methodologies, particularly action research, and developed distinctive research niches. These included thematic focus areas on land governance, ecological transition, and agricultural service policies. In one case, this resulted in a special issue of an interdisciplinary journal, strengthening the institution's academic profile.

In another context, a participating centre developed a flagship wellbeing study that led to the creation of a national Wellbeing Index based on population aspirations. As one researcher described:

"We did the pilot research and developed this index... The symposium allowed us to present the results to other researchers from Africa and Europe and to government officials."

This work began to anchor the center's institutional identity around wellbeing, ecological transition, and land governance, while also opening pathways for collaboration with ministries and international agencies.

However, progress and ownership were uneven. In several institutions, research agendas remained at draft stage or lacked operational detail. As one respondent observed:

"We had ideas, but turning them into a coherent agenda required more time and more people involved."

Where leadership and wider staff engagement were strong (4/5 institutions), research agendas gained legitimacy and traction. Where engagement was fragmented (1/5 institutions), agendas risked remaining aspirational, rather than functioning as fully embedded strategic tools with implications for long-term sustainability.

The initiative led to improvements in institutional visibility, though influence in national development debates remains episodic and not yet embedded.

Institutions expanded their visibility through public events, regional conferences, and enhanced communication platforms. In one context, a team emphasized that the programme increased the center's profile: "The IRCB program increased visibility (such as) through organizing an international symposium that gathered more than a hundred participants." They also mentioned a growing network, website development, and forthcoming publications as additional visibility gains. In another country, staff organized scientific days and an international conference that attracted submissions from researchers in "16 francophone countries," which, according to staff, raised the institution's visibility "nationally, internationally, and regionally." Scientific cafés and public events were used to bring research into wider public spaces, with one respondent noting that these activities helped change perceptions of research from "something reserved only for senior academics."

Visibility gains were strongly linked to the creation of the research unit and its new communication efforts. A mentor explained that visibility was "the area where progress was

most immediate," highlighting that prior to the project, teams had very limited visibility. Under the programme, the unit developed a logo and website, hired a community manager, and began producing regular newsletters. The team also organized scientific days, including a roundtable with former ministers and one sitting minister, described as a sign of "early recognition and visibility." In another context, the Centre used project resources and mentor support to build a presence on social media and digital platforms: "From zero, we now have almost 500 subscribers on LinkedIn and around 200 on Facebook who comment on our research posts." This digital visibility complemented their high-profile wellbeing symposium, which brought together African and European researchers and government actors.

Beyond events and digital communication, institutions reported growing engagement with national policy actors. Staff observed that, "since the symposium, our visibility and credibility have increased in interactions with many national institutions, such as the agricultural advisory directorate, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, national producer unions, and the National Institute for Research in Agriculture." In another country, research teams were asked to provide advice and services following a national crisis, including establishing a psychological clinic for traumatised populations. This, in turn, attracted wider government and donor attention. These examples suggest that the programme has begun to position institutions as relevant actors in policy-relevant debates.

Despite these advances, visibility and influence often remained closely tied to project-funded activities and personal networks, rather than embedded in institutional strategies and structures. Several respondents acknowledged the need for more systematic and long-term communication planning. A mentor stated that, while progress was notable, "they need a sustained strategy to reach an international audience," including decisions about language, target audiences, and long-term outreach. In addition, some institutions lack dedicated communication staff or stable budget lines for dissemination and as a result, there was limited evidence of structured media engagement, policy-brief production, or mechanisms to ensure continuity once project funds end. Thus, influence in national development debates remains episodic and vulnerable to shifting priorities.

Institutions progressed most when programme support aligned with internal priorities and mentoring was early, structured, and continuous.

Institutions perceived the most notable strides when their existing thematic interests and strengths aligned with the programme's objectives. In one country, the research unit's pre-existing engagement with land governance, food systems, and ecological transition provided a strong foundation for the development of a coherent strategic plan and a series of research and outreach activities. Researchers noted that GDN's support reinforced areas they were already working on, "such as doing more training, organizing conferences, and linking research to public policy." In another country, governance capacity-building allowed teams to position themselves around wellbeing and territorial development, attract funding from national sources such as a national research funding agency, and form partnerships with ministries and UN agencies. A respondent emphasized that the project's capacity-building dimension "equipped managers and teams to seek partnerships and attract more funding from other partners."

Mentoring likewise played a central enabling role in these cases. Several interviewees highlighted the mentor's contribution: "The most important support was the mentor. He helped us from the outset with management and to define objectives and indicators. Having the flexible grant was also a great support, and GDN supported us from the beginning in what we wanted to do." Another respondent remarked that the mentor's guidance on developing a theory of change and subsequent indicators was instrumental for creating a longer-term strategic plan. In two countries, mentors also encouraged the development of communication tools and digital visibility strategies, helping laboratories move from isolated activities toward more coherent profiles. In another, the mentor heavily encouraged regional networking, with the institution managing multiple international research grants and building relationships with universities across West and East Africa.

At the same time, evidence shows that when mentoring was delayed or inconsistent, institutional progress slowed and dependence on GDN remained high. One mentor reflected that they were brought in too late in the project cycle: "I should have been involved during the project design phase, not after approval. We lost time revising a project that could have been designed collaboratively from the beginning." These reflections suggest that the timing, quality, and continuity of mentoring are crucial to enabling institutions to translate flexible funds into lasting institutional change.

Evidence of sustainability is strongest where the programme supported the institutionalization of research management systems, agenda-setting processes, and governance practices (rather than project-specific activities alone). While financial sustainability remains uncertain in many contexts, several institutions reported that newly established procedures, strategic research agendas, and internal coordination mechanisms are likely to persist beyond the funding period. These changes suggest that the grant contributed to durable institutional capacity, even where continued external support may be required to maintain momentum.

6. Lessons Learned

Alignment of initiatives with existing institutional priorities accelerates capacity development. Institutions that already had active research in specific thematic areas and were able to integrate the programme's activities into ongoing conversations, experienced stronger institutional ownership. When the thematic focus resonated with pre-existing work, staff were more motivated, internal leadership was more supportive, and research agendas evolved more naturally into actionable strategies. In these settings, the grant acted as a catalyst, rather than a starting point, speeding up changes that institutions had already begun to envision.

Sustained and tailored mentoring is essential for developing institutional autonomy. Mentoring acted both as a technical resource and as a stabilizing force, helping institutions to move from conceptual phases toward more concrete planning and implementation. Regular, structured, mentoring sessions enabled researchers and coordinators to refine methodologies, strengthen internal coordination, troubleshoot operational challenges, and develop greater confidence in managing activities independently from GDN. Inversely,

when mentoring was inconsistent, late, or mismatched to institutional needs, universities became more dependent on GDN for direction and progress towards autonomous agenda setting and project management slowed.

Foundational administrative systems must be strengthened early, alongside the focus on human skill-building. Institutional capacity cannot grow in environments where procurement is slow, financial procedures are overly rigid, or internal reporting lines are unclear (regardless of how strong the technical capacity of researchers may be). Despite preparation, many institutions reported that recurring administrative delays hindered implementation, which in turn affected the motivation of teams. This illustrates that research capacity must be built upon operational systems that are functional, predictable, and adapted to the needs of research units. Lasting change happens when staff gain new competencies at the same time that institutions reform their internal procedures, decision-making structures, and workflow processes. This means that institutional strengthening also requires realistic timelines, flexibility, and patience, as universities work through systemic constraints.

Visibility requires strategic and sustained communication, not only event-based outreach. Short-term workshops or conferences, even when successful and well attended, do not automatically translate into long-term institutional or policy influence. Institutions that invested in longer-term communication structures such as newsletters, updated websites, social media channels, or designated outreach roles (staff), were better able to maintain program momentum, attract partners, and participate in national debates beyond a single event. This suggests that visibility is a strategic function that needs long-term planning, skills, and resources, rather than a series of isolated activities tied to one-off project funding.

Research agenda development works best when approached as an institution-wide process. When agendas are created collectively through workshops, cross-departmental consultations, and leadership engagement, they carry more legitimacy, foster deeper ownership, and are more likely to be implemented sustainably. In contrast, agendas drafted by small teams or individuals with limited consultation, lacked institutional visibility and often remained at the conceptual stage. Institution-wide processes also make it easier to embed agendas into wider teaching, partnerships, and resource mobilization strategies.

Flexibility is critical given the differing governance structures, capacities, and leadership engagement across institutions. Rigid programming models cannot accommodate differences such as multi-layered approval processes, staffing shortages, leadership turnover, or unstable country contexts. Adaptive programming, such as flexible budgeting, adjusted timelines, and room to re-sequence activities, allows support to adjust to institutional rhythms and external shocks. This ensures progress even in complex environments. Flexibility is particularly important where external crises (strikes, insecurity, political instability) interact with internal constraints.

Sustainable research capacity strengthening is achieved when institutions lead agenda setting. Locally-driven agendas that are rooted in institutional strengths and national needs created stronger research identities and reduced dependence on external intervention. When institutions were able to define their own thematic focus and flagship studies, the grant contributed to clearer value propositions, improved credibility, and better alignment with stakeholders. Conversely, where external expectations dominated, outputs were more short-term and less embedded in institutional culture.

Small catalytic grants paired with strategic mentoring can drive meaningful institutional change. Funding alone was not sufficient for universities to strengthen their research identity or institutional systems. It was the combination of modest resources and hands-on, context-sensitive, mentoring that enabled them to translate financial inputs into meaningful reforms. Mentors helped institutions decide how to use funds strategically: guiding prioritization, the sequencing of activities, the development of governance tools, and the establishment of internal processes that may not have emerged from the grant alone. In several cases, mentoring also compensated for gaps in staff experience with planning, budgeting, or funded research. This ensured that funds were used to build more durable structures, rather than focusing on only short-term outputs. These outcomes demonstrate that catalytic funding becomes more transformative when paired with sustained and high-quality mentorship.

Influence in national research ecosystems requires long-term, strategic, engagement beyond the life of a single project. Visibility and credibility grow cumulatively through repeated interactions, consistent communication, and ongoing relationship-building with policymakers, donors, and civil society. One-off conferences or symposia can open doors, but policy influence depends on staying present in debates, responding to emerging evidence needs, and maintaining relationships over time. This suggests that short project cycles need to be embedded within longer-term institutional strategies, if research is to shape national and regional development agendas.

7. Recommendations

Support institutions to finalize and operationalize research agendas: ensuring they become living strategies, rather than static documents. Many institutions articulate promising strategic plans, but struggle when it comes to translating these priorities into actionable accountability mechanisms and communication materials. This affects the ability to reinforce their research identity and implementation. GDN can support this by facilitating leadership capacity workshops, wherein they focus on helping institutional leaders to map activities against wider strategic pillars, as well as establishing periodic review processes that align agendas with evolving national development priorities. Doing so strengthens

institutional identity, reinforces coherence across research activities, and positions institutions to attract funding and partnerships.

Invest in strengthening foundational administrative and managerial systems early in the program cycle. Research autonomy cannot be achieved or sustained without reliable operational systems, including clear financial procedures, coherent internal approval processes, documented workflows, and effective coordination structures. Prioritizing these reforms at the outset (before major research activities begin) would help prevent implementation delays, reduce dependence on external support, and create an enabling environment for developing research agendas. Likewise, early development of templates, SOPs, financial controls, and cross-unit coordination would ensure that institutional systems mature in parallel with technical capacity building of staff.

Expand and systematize mentoring models to include both technical research support and organizational coaching. Institutions require guidance not only in scientific methodology, but also in planning, team coordination, leadership engagement, conflict resolution, and strategic decision-making. A more structured or tiered mentoring model, offering differentiated levels of support depending on institutional maturity, would ensure more efficient allocation of resources while providing universities with the specific depth of support they require. Regular mentor–mentee check-ins, peer mentor exchanges, and early involvement of mentors during proposal design is also needed to further enhance program outcomes.

Strengthen institutional visibility through targeted capacity-building in communication, policy engagement, and external relations. Universities require support to transition from event-based visibility to a more stable, long-term, presence in national policy debates. Training on knowledge management, communication strategy development, policy dialogue, and media engagement would help institutions to amplify translation of their research outputs. Practical support, such as developing communication toolkits, improving website content, or establishing social media guidelines, can help build a public voice. Institutions with sustained visibility are more likely to influence policy actors and attract partnerships.

Engage institutional leadership throughout the entire program cycle to secure alignment, continuity, and internal legitimacy. Institution-level progress depends heavily on the commitment and involvement of university leadership, who influence internal resource allocation, recognition, and decision-making. GDN should involve university leaders from the outset via structured briefing sessions, co-developed commitments, and periodic progress reviews. Doing so will help ensure that reforms are institutionalized, better integrated into university governance and values, and more likely to be sustained in the long term.

Tailor support packages to the maturity, capacity level, and priorities of each institution.

Participating universities operate with different levels of readiness in relation to staffing, governance structures, and strategic clarity. A differentiated model, such as classifying institutions as “basic,” “emerging,” or “advanced,” would help GDN design interventions that are appropriately targeted and therefore achievable. Tailored support would also help prevent overstretching institutions that are still developing foundational systems, while allowing more advanced institutions to pursue more complex reforms.

Support institutions in developing resource mobilization strategies aligned with their research identities.

As institutions clarify their thematic areas and develop research niches, they need the parallel skills and tools to pursue funding opportunities that reflect these identities. GDN can facilitate this by offering advanced training in proposal development, fundraising strategy, donor mapping, partnership negotiation, and budget planning. Strengthening institutional capacity to secure grants aligned with their agendas will reduce dependency on single donors, increase financial sustainability, and maintain momentum beyond the life of the program.

Facilitate peer learning across institutions to accelerate ecosystem-wide strengthening.

Creating structured spaces for cross-country learning through communities of practice, joint workshops, thematic exchanges, and shared repositories of tools would allow institutions to learn from each other, reduce duplication, and build a pan-African research ecosystem grounded in collective capacity. Peer learning can also help to normalize the uptake of good practices and accelerate institutional change across universities.

Introduce monitoring tools that allow institutions to track progress in research management, agenda development, visibility, and autonomy.

Clear and user-friendly monitoring tools, such as dashboards or self-assessment frameworks, would help institutions to understand their own development trajectories and identify priority areas for improvement. These tools would also support GDN in providing targeted, evidence-informed, support and make reporting more efficient. Structured monitoring practices also encourage continuous reflection and therefore help to embed a culture of data-driven, yet flexible, management.

Address structural barriers by integrating change management and capacity retention strategies into program design.

Sustained institutional development requires stabilized capacity, even amid leadership turnover, staff movement, or administrative restructuring. GDN can therefore support institutions to draft (or formalize) internal policies, clarify staff roles, better document workflows, and establish dedicated research or project management units that would reduce reliance on individual “champions.” These measures will also help ensure continuity, protect institutional memory, and embed reforms within permanent structures (rather than within individuals).

Annex 1: Intended Outcomes of the IRCB Volet 1 Programme

The IRCB Volet 1 Programme articulated a set of intended outcomes spanning both institutional and individual levels of capacity strengthening.

At the institutional level, the programme sought to achieve the following objectives:

- **General Objective 1:** Strengthen the research capacities of research institutions in Francophone Africa.
 - **Specific Objective 1.1:** Strengthen the institutional visibility and positioning of research institutions in Francophone Africa, including their ability to articulate and communicate a clear research identity.
 - **Specific Objective 1.2:** Strengthen the managerial and organisational capacities of research institutions, particularly in relation to research planning, coordination, governance, and resource management.