

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

Case Study: Regional Grant  
Scheme for Young Researchers  
(Volet 2)

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# Table of Contents

<b>Table of Contents</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Acronyms</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1 Case Study Purpose and Scope	4
<b>2. Context: ICRB Volet 2</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3. Evaluation Questions for the Program</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4. Methodology</b>	<b>7</b>
4.1 Methods	7
<b>5. Findings</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>6. Lessons Learned</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>7. Recommendations</b>	<b>24</b>

# 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

KII Key Informant Interview

# 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 examine whether and how the IRCB Volet 2 Regional Grant Scheme generates tangible benefits for early-career researchers, particularly in terms of strengthened research capacities, more competitive professional profiles, and improved career prospects. The case study also seeks to understand how individual-level support interacts with institutional and programme-level dynamics, including linkages with Volet 1, and whether the results achieved are likely to endure beyond the grant period. Findings are intended to inform future design and targeting of GDN's support to early-career researchers in Francophone Africa.

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 2 programme, with a specific focus on its implementation during the evaluation period from 2021 to 2025. This case study will:

- Assess the extent to which Volet 2 grants have strengthened the research, scientific, technical, managerial, and collaborative capacities of early-career researchers.
- Analyse whether these strengthened capacities have translated into concrete career-related outcomes, such as publication records, access to further funding, professional recognition, and participation in research networks.
- Examine how synergies between Volet 1 and Volet 2 have functioned in practice, and how institutional contexts have shaped or influenced Volet 2 results.
- Assess the likelihood that programme results will continue beyond the funding period, including the durability of skills, research agendas, collaborations, and institutional support.
- Identify key enabling and constraining factors affecting capacity development, career progression, and sustainability, and draw practical lessons to inform future programming and potential scale-up.

## 2. Context: IRCB Volet 2

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

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

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

The pilot edition of Volet 2 selected 60 researchers from nine Francophone African countries through a competitive, multi-stage process. Each selected researcher received a grant of up to EUR 10,000 to implement an individual research project over a one-year period (2024–2025), along with tailored mentoring and technical supervision. Grantees also received travel grants (referred to as mobility grants) of up to EUR 700 to attend research events or training related to their work. In addition to funding research activities, the programme was explicitly designed as a learning-by-doing mechanism, enabling grantees to acquire practical experience in proposal refinement, budget management, research implementation, reporting, and dissemination. The programme also required grantees to prepare research outputs suitable for submission to peer-reviewed journals or academic publishers, reinforcing its focus on tangible professional outcomes.

A distinctive feature of Volet 2 is its integration within the broader IRCB architecture. Management of the individual grants was deliberately embedded within the ecosystem created under Volet 1, with selected research institutions participating in the co-design and co-management of the grant scheme. In practice, this meant that partner institutions were not only beneficiaries but also actively involved in shaping key elements of the programme, including the design of the call for proposals and selection processes, as well as the operational management of the scheme alongside GDN (e.g., oversight of implementation, engagement with grantees, and coordination of mentoring and supervision). This arrangement aimed not only to strengthen the managerial capacities of partner institutions, but also to situate individual researchers within supportive institutional environments, thereby enhancing mentorship, visibility, and the longer-term sustainability of results.

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

### **3. Evaluation Questions for the Program**

- To what extent has participation in the IRCB Volet 2 grant influenced the career trajectories of supported researchers?
- How, and in what ways, has the grant contributed to the development of more

competitive research profiles among Volet 2 grantees?

These questions are examined through three analytical lenses: capacity strengthening, programme coherence and synergies, and sustainability.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Methods

**Document Review:** A systematic desk review was conducted of programme documents, including: institutional capacity-building plans, progress reports, mentoring and training materials, 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 26 semi-structured interviews with IRCB Volet 2 stakeholders, including grantees, GDN staff, and donors. Interviews were tailored to the initiative’s logic and outcome areas, and conducted in French.

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

Table 1. Evaluation Sample - Stakeholder type

Program	GDN Staff	Mentors	Grantees	Donor	Total Stakeholders
IRCB Volet 2	1	3	51	1	56

## 5. Findings

**EQ:** To what extent has participation in the IRCB Volet 2 grant influenced the career trajectories of supported researchers?

**Capacity gains translated into early career impacts and increased competitiveness at key transition points.**

The strengthening of research capacities translated into tangible early career impacts and increased competitiveness for many participants. As one respondent noted, "I felt it was an excellent opportunity to deepen my research, explain the work being done, and contribute meaningfully to the topic." Survey data shows that 100% of the respondents perceived improvements in their professional profiles and competitiveness for academic positions, consultancies, and further research funding. Several participants linked their career progression directly to their involvement in the GDN programme. One shared, "I was recruited by the university's Centre for Development Research as a research associate. This outcome is tied to the research I undertook in the GDN program." Another explained, "I have been promoted. The conditions for the grade change committee included participating in research programmes, so conducting work within the framework of the GDN played an important role in the grade change." For some, the programme strengthened their credibility at key transition points. As one researcher described, "When I was competing to be a researcher at the university, I explained to the jury my research project that I had just obtained with GDN, and they were very satisfied. It really facilitated my recruitment." The same respondent later secured a position at UNESCO, noting that interviewers were impressed by their GDN experience. Similarly, another participant reported being selected for a national programme on land tenure security in Côte d'Ivoire, explaining that their project experience and publications helped them connect research to national policy priorities, which "contributed to my selection." Beyond promotions and recruitment, several participants also reported increased motivation to remain in research careers, rather than disengage at critical early-career transition points.

The programme supported early scholarly outputs and professional exposure. All participants presented at conferences or submitted articles to peer-reviewed journals, opportunities that had previously been inaccessible in their contexts. According to the document review, 58 researchers have submitted their papers, and 10 have been published at the time of writing this report. Even where publications were still under review, the experience of producing manuscripts and navigating submission processes strengthened professional credibility and confidence. As one researcher explained, "when my work was selected for presentation, it changed how others saw me and how I saw myself."

Beyond technical learning, the programme reinforced participants' belief in their academic potential. Several described a shift from seeing themselves as "students," to identifying as professionals capable of contributing to scientific debates. This shift in self-perception translated into concrete career impacts, with multiple researchers reporting increased confidence in applying for national and international opportunities.

The grant also played a stabilising role at high-risk transition points, enabling early-career researchers to remain engaged in research, rather than disengage due to limited opportunities or resources. Financial support emerged as particularly decisive. All young researcher respondents emphasised that funding was critical in contexts where research financing is scarce. As one participant explained, "funding for research is very limited in many African countries, making it difficult for early-career researchers to gain experience or visibility. Without funding research is impossible."

Participants also highlighted the practical value of the grant. One noted that "the funding covered fieldwork expenses and allowed us to purchase high-quality research equipment. Another aspect I appreciated was that after the project ended, the equipment remained

available to us, which supports future research." For many, this support was not just helpful but essential. As one respondent stated, "the financial support was definitely most important. Research is my field and what I want to do in the future, so I was working on something very relevant to me, but without this financing, it would not have been possible."

**Participation in IRCB Volet 2 was associated with concrete early-career advancement for several researchers.**

Beyond perceived improvements in confidence and competitiveness, the programme contributed to concrete career advancement outcomes for several participants. As one respondent explained, "being a part of this fellowship highlighted the quality of my research. It placed my work at a level comparable to others with recognized expertise. It contributed positively to my profile as a researcher." According to survey data, 60% of researchers reported securing new professional opportunities or having them in progress following participation in the programme.

At least two participants described securing research or consultancy positions shortly after completing their projects, with selection committees explicitly referencing the GDN-supported research as evidence of their capacity to independently design and manage studies. One researcher noted that their involvement in the programme "played a decisive role" during a competitive recruitment process, as it demonstrated their ability to deliver a complete research cycle and produce publishable outputs. Another participant described joining a national-level technical committee after presenting their findings, indicating recognition beyond their home institution.

Participation strengthened candidates' profiles in applications for doctoral or postdoctoral programmes, as well as senior research awards. Others reported being invited to collaborate on new research initiatives, or consultancies, as a result of increased visibility during programme symposia or dissemination events. As one respondent stated proudly, due to his strengthened profile as a researcher, "I have been asked to join a number of important think tanks." These examples suggest that the programme not only improved perceived readiness for career progression but, in select instances, directly preceded professional mobility. As another participant explained, "I applied to a national programme on land tenure security in Côte d'Ivoire and was selected. During the interview, my project experience and publications helped me connect the research with national land issues. That added value contributed to my selection."

While these outcomes were not universal and varied by institutional context and field, they provide concrete illustrations of how strengthened capacities, visibility, and credibility translated into career advancement. The presence of such cases strengthens the plausibility of broader survey findings indicating improved competitiveness and professional positioning among participants.

## **Institutional and mentorship variability shaped the depth and equity of programme outcomes**

Across both career trajectory and competitiveness outcomes, the depth and consistency of gains were shaped by institutional context and the quality of mentorship relationships. Multiple participants described mentorship as central to their development. As one noted, “mentoring really helped me from a methodological and analytical point of view, and even in terms of writing.”

Others emphasized the accessibility and technical guidance provided by mentors: “The mentoring component worked very well. My mentor was accessible, attentive, and constructive in his feedback. He helped me refine my research approach, clarify my methodological choices, and strengthen the analytical sections of my work.” Similarly, one respondent highlighted practical skill development: “My mentor gave me a lot of documents and helped me learn how to use certain data processing and analysis software. She also helped me write an article, which was the final deliverable.”

However, implementation conditions were not uniform across institutions, resulting in uneven progression, particularly where disciplinary alignment was weak or mentor availability was limited. As one respondent explained, “since he is a historian and I am a sociologist, our perspectives were different, creating challenges in aligning data collected and the final formatting of the manuscript.” Another reflected, “mentors should ideally be from the same field as the young researchers. My mentor was an economist while I was working in environmental sciences. This created methodological mismatches. Better alignment would help both researchers and mentors.” Time constraints also affected the quality of engagement. As one participant stated, “To be honest, my mentor did not have much time. It was difficult to work closely together. He did respond occasionally, but not consistently. We often progressed on our own, submitting reports but waiting a long time for feedback. The planned schedule of monthly meetings did not happen in practice.”

Institutional coherence played a role. In universities that had previously benefited from institutional capacity strengthening, or that maintained active laboratory structures, young researchers operated within supportive research environments. Supervisors were engaged, internal seminars provided opportunities for feedback, and administrative teams facilitated procurement and reporting. In these contexts, programme inputs were reinforced by existing structures, and researchers described feeling embedded within a community invested in their success. As one respondent explained, “the technical supervision at our partner institution at the university was equally important. As young researchers, we had no experience managing a project. This programme was our first experience. Having a technical team who guided us at every step helped us progress steadily and carefully. It pushed us to pay attention to each stage of the project so we wouldn’t make mistakes. Personally, that was incredibly useful. Our project manager was

always available. We raised all our questions and uncertainties with him, and he always guided us. All of this contributed enormously to the success of our projects."

However, disparities in institutional commitment, administrative capacity, and supervisory engagement created uneven experiences across participating institutions. Many of these challenges reflect broader structural constraints affecting research institutions in the region, where administrative systems are often slow, fragmented, or under-resourced. In such environments, participants encountered delays related to procurement, financial approvals, or fieldwork authorization. As one participant noted, "I had planned everything, but procurement took months, so I had to redo my whole schedule." While these constraints were not specific to the programme, they shaped how effectively participants were able to engage with it. In some cases, institutional bottlenecks limited researchers' ability to apply newly acquired managerial skills consistently and reduced flexibility in implementation. This suggests that programme outcomes were influenced not only by the design of the intervention, but also by the institutional environments in which participants were embedded.

Mentorship quality and thematic alignment further shaped outcomes. Where mentors' expertise closely matched researchers' topics, mentorship was described as intensive and transformative. Participants reported receiving detailed methodological feedback, support in refining research questions, and guidance on positioning their work within broader academic debates. As one respondent noted, "the program gave me access to an experienced mentor in my field who helped me identify priorities in my research." Another explained, "at the beginning, when the mentor and mentee from the same field were paired up, she listened to me and asked questions to understand my project and my motivation. We restructured and reorganised the project together." Within the same field, differences in perspective were experienced as intellectually productive. As one participant reflected, "my mentor provided consistent support and meaningful feedback. His way of looking at the subject was different from mine, which was very useful. His comments helped strengthen the qualitative aspects of the research and encouraged me to take certain arguments further."

Communication constraints also affected mentoring dynamics. Geographic distance, time zone differences, and unreliable internet connectivity all reduced opportunities for sustained, real-time, exchange. Some participants reported that mentorship intensity fluctuated over the course of the grant period, particularly during later implementation stages when research challenges became more complex and timely feedback was most needed. One respondent advised, "for future grantees, I would recommend not waiting for mentor feedback before progressing, because mentors are often busy." As another noted, "it was difficult to work closely together. He did respond occasionally, but not consistently. We often progressed on our own, submitting reports but waiting a long time for feedback. The planned schedule of monthly meetings did not happen in practice."

These variations did not negate the overall value of institutional support or mentorship. However, they reveal that outcomes were highly contingent on contextual and relational factors. For a programme positioning mentorship and institutional engagement as core mechanisms of impact, variability in alignment and support structures has implications for equity and consistency of results. Participants operating in well-resourced and well-coordinated environments tended to experience deeper capacity consolidation and smoother progression, while those in more constrained contexts faced additional hurdles that moderated the extent of gains.

These findings indicate that while the programme model was broadly coherent, its effects were mediated by institutional strength and mentoring fit. Addressing these structural differences will be important for ensuring more equitable outcomes in future iterations.

### **Operational and financial delays increased vulnerability at critical career stages.**

While the programme design emphasized autonomy and hands-on project management, interviews revealed recurring operational challenges related to delayed funds disbursement and administrative rigidity. As one respondent noted, "it was difficult to adapt the budget to GDN's budget planning. GDN makes disbursements on a percentage basis, but research requires funding aligned with planned activities." Another recommended, "GDN should adjust funding disbursement based on the nature of the research project. Some studies require conducting activities simultaneously, while others can be implemented in phases. Funding should adapt accordingly."

Across institutions, multiple participants reported that payments were received later than anticipated, compressing implementation timelines and creating uncertainty in planning. 20% of researchers described having to postpone fieldwork, or pre-finance activities, while awaiting transfers. One participant explained: "Delays in disbursement and limited funding... we often had to cover the gap ourselves." In some cases, disbursement schedules were simply misaligned with project cycles. As one researcher described: "towards the end, many young researchers had to pre-finance activities to produce final deliverables, because the last tranche often arrived after activities were already completed."

For early career scholars without institutional financial buffers or access to bridging funds, this created tangible vulnerability. Several participants emphasized that assuming personal financial risk was particularly stressful at a career stage already marked by uncertainty. As one respondent explained, "we experienced several delays in transfers, which put us in a difficult position. At one point, we thought the project was dead because we had no news. Then suddenly they called back to say that the transfers would be made." Another participant highlighted the practical consequences for research implementation: "When we were waiting for funding to carry out an activity, we had to wait two, three, four weeks. As

a result, our schedule was quite disrupted. We had to think of another way to make up for lost time, especially during the collection phase, which was quite critical.”

Several researchers also reported missing opportunities to participate in conferences or dissemination events because funds were not released in time, or reimbursements were delayed (or insufficient) to cover travel costs. In these instances, operational delays had reputational consequences, limiting researchers’ ability to capitalize on visibility opportunities that were central to the programme’s competitiveness objectives. Respondents therefore recommended adjustments to the mobility grant. As one noted, “[the program should] increase the mobility grant, as it was too small to cover travel costs even within the region. Also increase its duration, as it was short and prevented many from using it.” Another added, “increase the amount of the mobility grant. Seven hundred euros is not enough for mobility outside the country. Make the mobility grant award process automatic, as many people do not understand how to apply and are unable to benefit from it.”

Participants also described uncertainty around reimbursement procedures, approval timelines, and financial communication. In institutional contexts where procurement systems were already slow or fragmented, these ambiguities compounded delays. Researchers reported spending considerable time navigating administrative processes or clarifying allowable expenses, which at times diverted attention from core research tasks. As one respondent noted, “the financial reporting template was sometimes complex despite the online training. We resolved issues through back and forth communication.” At the same time, these challenges reflect the realities of managing externally funded grants and formed part of the capacity-building process. For many participants, this was their first experience engaging with formal financial and reporting requirements, and navigating these systems contributed to strengthening their administrative and project management skills over time.

More specific technical challenges were also highlighted. One participant noted difficulties with financial reporting conversions: “The problem I had with the financial report is that, for example, we make our purchases. But when the whole amount is not used, it becomes complicated to do the conversion calculation. I suggest that they create a column for values in local currency, such as francs, and another column that automatically calculates the values in euros.” Budget structure and rigidity were also raised as concerns. One respondent explained, “it was difficult to adapt the budget to GDN’s budget planning. GDN makes disbursements on a percentage basis, but research requires funding based on planned activities.” Finally, another noted the impact of inflation and shifting local costs: “The local context had a significant impact on budgeting. When you plan costs and then realise on the ground that prices are rising, it is complicated. It would have been good if GDN allowed an increase to compensate for this.”

**EQ: How, and in what ways, has the grant contributed to the development of more competitive research profiles among Volet 2 grantees?**

**The programme strengthened scientific and analytical capacities by enabling researchers to lead complete research projects for the first time.**

The programme strengthened young researchers' scientific and analytical capacities by providing their first structured experience of leading a complete research project, from conceptualisation and proposal development, to fieldwork, analysis, and drafting outputs. Evidence across participating institutions shows growth in core competencies, including research design, methodological coherence, analytical reasoning, and academic writing. These qualitative findings are reinforced by survey responses, in which a majority of young researchers reported improved ability to design research projects, apply appropriate methodologies, and structure analytical outputs. Virtually all respondents reported gaining new or strengthened research skills.

Several participants described substantial methodological growth. As one noted, "the programme helped me a lot to strengthen my research skills. I usually work on macroeconomics, so field-based microeconomic research was new to me. I learned new methodologies, techniques for field data collection and analysis, and gained experience in managing research activities." Another explained improvements across multiple stages of the research cycle: "For research design, I learned to refine the relevance and clarity of the research questions. In my methodology, I strengthened sampling strategies and improved the consistency between objectives and methods. Finally, I strengthened my analytical skills, structuring results more clearly and linking empirical findings to the literature."

For some researchers, gains were more foundational, yet still significant. One respondent stated, "the GDN program strengthened my capacity to conduct a research project autonomously and produce scientific work." Others emphasized increased methodological rigor: "The program strengthened my ability to structure solid analyses, adopt more rigorous methodologies, and produce more credible scientific work." Finally, several participants highlighted changes in their overall research approach: "My way of working has evolved. I've become more analytical, more demanding in formulating hypotheses, and more strategic in how I present results. I can now produce international-level scientific articles more quickly, conduct deeper mobility analyses, and anticipate theoretical debates before writing."

Many participants entered the programme with limited confidence and little exposure to applied research practice. As one young researcher noted, "before this project, I had never written a full research proposal, or designed indicators. I did not know where to start." The programme therefore functioned as a bridge between theoretical training and applied

research practice: enabling researchers to translate academic knowledge into credible and fundable research work.

**Mentorship and structured guidance were central mechanisms for shaping research quality and scientific confidence.**

Mentorship and structured guidance played a pivotal role in improving research quality and scientific confidence. Mentors supported participants in refining research questions, aligning methods with available data, and developing coherent analytical narratives. One mentor described a participant's progression as follows: "They began with a very broad idea, but over time they learned how to narrow it into something researchable and feasible."

Iterative feedback loops, supported by templates and practical tools, helped young researchers internalise scientific standards associated with competitive research environments. Several participants reported marked improvements in analytical writing, shifting from descriptive reporting to structured analysis. As one participant explained, "I learned how to structure my results and discussion so that my arguments are coherent. Before, I was just describing. Now, I can analyse."

Beyond technical support, mentorship also provided psychological reinforcement. For many participants, this was the first time their research was treated as legitimate and worth investing in. As one researcher noted, "it's not only technical support, it's psychological support. For many, this is the first time someone tells them their research matters."

**The programme accelerated the intellectual growth of early-career researchers, strengthening their ability to position themselves within competitive research environments.**

Beyond strengthening technical competencies, the programme contributed to a deeper intellectual and epistemic transformation among many participants. Interviews suggest that participation in IRCB Volet 2 did not merely improve discrete research skills, but reshaped how young researchers conceptualised, framed, and positioned their work within broader scientific debates. As one respondent reflected, mentorship played a key role in this shift: "My mentor improved my writing skills by strengthening coherence, transitions, and the overall narrative of the paper. He also shared insights about publication strategies and how to position my work within broader scientific debates."

Several participants described a shift from procedural execution of research tasks, to a more reflective and theoretically grounded approach to inquiry. One researcher noted, "It reshaped how I think, frame, and produce research." Another explained that through structured mentorship and iterative feedback, they learned to anticipate conceptual critiques and engage more confidently with theoretical frameworks: "Now I can anticipate debates before writing. I don't just describe results, I situate them."

For many, this represented a transition from reproducing academic formats learned during formal training, to internalising the norms and expectations of competitive research environments. Participants reported becoming more attentive to methodological coherence, argument structure, literature positioning, and analytical depth. As one researcher reflected after revising their manuscript, "when I looked at my final paper, I thought, this doesn't feel like the old me. I would never have written like this before."

This transformation was reinforced through mentorship, peer review exchanges, and exposure to merit-based evaluation processes, including paper selection for symposia. Being required to refine research questions, defend methodological choices, and respond to structured critiques fostered a stronger sense of intellectual ownership. Participants described moving from feeling like "students completing assignments" to identifying as independent contributors to scientific discourse.

Importantly, this epistemic shift also strengthened confidence and scholarly identity. Several participants emphasised that the programme validated their capacity to produce knowledge of relevance beyond their immediate institutional environments. As one researcher put it, "it's not just about funding. It made me feel like my research matters."

While the depth of this transformation varied depending on mentorship alignment and institutional support, evidence across interviews suggests that the programme accelerated the maturation of researchers' intellectual positioning, particularly at critical early career transition stages. As one mentor explained, "I saw a change within the first month. At first he was dependent, but as I pushed him, he eventually came out of his shell and started calling me frequently. One memorable incident was when he called me at two in the morning. I asked how he could call at that hour, and he said he had just had an idea and was afraid he would forget it if he slept. I told him that if he was awake thinking about research at that hour, it meant he was truly getting into it and becoming autonomous, because when you do research, it is the research that keeps you awake. That is when I realised he was committed and becoming more responsible."

Another mentor reflected on how his mentee matured despite significant personal challenges: "I definitely noticed that he became more independent in his research. Despite the setback caused by his illness, he worked hard to catch up. He became more autonomous, took more initiative, and made decisions independently. By the end of the program, he had delivered all the expected outputs on time, which showed strong engagement. He had become a mature researcher, more confident, more disciplined, and better able to manage his tasks and responsibilities."

**The programme strengthened managerial and project management capacities, increasing professional autonomy and discipline.**

The programme strengthened young researchers' managerial and project management capacities, contributing to greater professional autonomy and discipline. For most participants, this was their first opportunity to manage a budget, coordinate fieldwork, oversee procurement, or track deliverables. One researcher explained, "I learned to plan each step of my research and anticipate delays. Before, I didn't know how to structure a workplan."

Others reported gaining confidence in preparing TORs, managing enumerators, and organising meetings. As one participant noted, "I realized how important communication is in project management. It's not something we learn in school." Survey findings reinforce these outcomes, with many respondents reporting increased confidence in independently planning and managing workplans, budgets, and timelines. Respondents frequently identified project management and planning skills as practical and transferable competencies beyond their academic training.

Mentors also played an important role in strengthening managerial skills, helping researchers to align work plans with realistic timelines and to better understand donor expectations regarding deliverables and financial justification. As one mentor explained, "we went through the workplan line by line. They learned to adjust activities to what was feasible, not what sounded ideal." Another participant directly attributed his improved project management skills to mentoring: "My mentor really helped me understand project management. He gave me practical advice on budgeting transparency and helped me structure my study more clearly as a project."

### **The programme enhanced researchers' visibility and credibility in policy and applied research spaces.**

Beyond academic competitiveness, the programme contributed to increased visibility and credibility in policy and applied research spaces. Several participants described engaging directly with municipal authorities, ministries, or sectoral actors as part of disseminating their findings. In some cases, research results were presented to local government officials or institutional leaders, prompting discussion of practical implications. One researcher noted that presenting their findings at the municipal level led to formal recognition from local authorities, while another described engagement with ministry representatives who expressed interest in the mapping and analytical outputs produced through the grant.

These engagements were particularly significant in contexts where early-career researchers rarely have opportunities to present directly to decision-makers. For several participants, the experience of discussing findings with policymakers or practitioners reinforced the applied relevance of their work and strengthened their professional credibility beyond academic departments. As one participant reflected, the programme helped ensure that their research did not "remain in drawers," but instead entered public and institutional conversations.

While evidence of direct policy uptake remains limited at this stage, the exposure to policy audiences and the opportunity to translate research into accessible formats represent meaningful steps toward broader societal engagement. These interactions expanded researchers' professional networks and enhanced their positioning not only as academics, but as contributors to national or local development debates.

**Expanded networks and increased visibility created early conditions for sustainability, though collaboration depth varied.**

The programme strengthened collaborative capacities, networks, and professional visibility for young researchers, contributing to early conditions for long-term sustainability. Structured interactions such as peer review sessions, cohort exchanges, workshops, and mentorship meetings exposed researchers to new disciplinary and professional perspectives. As one participant noted, "before this, I only knew people in my department. Now, I'm connected to researchers in many fields, and we exchange ideas regularly."

These relationships were not merely social. In several cases, they led to technical feedback, methodological support, and emerging collaborations. One participant explained, "we are already planning a joint article with someone I met through the programme." Mentors actively encouraged researchers to present drafts, seek feedback, and engage with broader academic communities, reinforcing norms of collective knowledge production. As one young researcher reflected, "I developed links with my mentor's laboratory and the host institution. Thematic groups were created based on research topics, enabling further collaboration. These new national and regional groups are very important to me. At the start of my career, I tended to work alone, but my mentor convinced me that research requires openness. These collaborations broadened my perspective and strengthened my methodological skills. My mentor helped me understand that an open mindset is fundamental for scientific progress." Another respondent added, "my mentor connected me with one of his PhD students working on the same topic, which helped me access relevant documentation. He also helped me connect with laboratories in Benin and Burkina Faso during presentations."

The programme also had a marked impact on professional visibility. Participation in scientific days, programme symposia, and merit-based selection processes increased researchers' profiles within academic and policy circles. One participant explained, "when my work was selected, it changed how others viewed me. It made me feel like a real researcher." For many, this was their first opportunity to present research beyond their immediate academic departments.

However, collaboration varied significantly by institutional context. In institutions with established laboratory structures, young researchers benefited from regular internal seminars and interdisciplinary support. In contrast, environments lacking a strong research culture offered fewer opportunities for sustained collaboration. Virtual exchanges were

further hindered by inconsistent internet access, scheduling challenges, and uneven engagement. As one young researcher stated, "I did not collaborate with other researchers. GDN put us in a group with other young researchers and we sometimes shared publications, but on a personal level, I didn't really collaborate with any other researchers." Another participant similarly reflected, "in the case of the GDN project, I wouldn't say that I collaborated...because the interaction I had with them wasn't what you would call real collaboration, just informal chatting. I did collaborate elsewhere, just not within the framework of GDN."

**Early signals of sustainability exist, but long-term durability depends on post-grant opportunities and institutional support.**

Early signals of sustainability are evident, but long term durability depends on continued access to opportunities and institutional support. The programme generated early indicators of sustainability through strengthened skills, confidence, networks, and career progression. Survey data suggest that many participants believe the competencies and connections developed will continue to support their research trajectories beyond the grant period.

Several researchers described feeling better equipped to pursue academic and professional opportunities. As one participant stated, "I now feel capable of continuing research on my own. Before, I didn't think I could." Likewise, several participants submitted proposals to new funding opportunities, applied for doctoral or postdoctoral programmes, or joined research collectives. One particularly ambitious young researcher described a sequence of scholarships and competitive awards that followed his participation in the programme: "Now I have obtained a scholarship with my university. Another university asked whether I had previously received a scholarship, which became a strong point in my application. It is also something I was able to discuss at the Free University of Brussels, where I presented my work. I now have a scholarship that allows me to spend a few months in Brussels, with an allowance and research expenses. At the same time, I applied for and won another postdoctoral scholarship in my home country. I also joined another programme that supports article writing. In all of these applications, I highlighted my work with GDN and wrote my proposals with more confidence. I received one grant, then another. I was in the top 2 percent of those accepted. There is clearly a before and after the GDN programme in terms of opportunities."

Some achieved publications, while others continued revising manuscripts in response to reviewer feedback. Networking during programme events also generated opportunities for ongoing collaboration. These examples suggest that the programme has generated short-to medium-term momentum. However, whether these gains translate into sustained research careers depends heavily on the surrounding institutional and funding ecosystem. Funding sustainability remains fragile in contexts where institutional support and financial predictability are weak, and not all institutions have the resources or incentives to continue

mentoring young researchers beyond the programme. Some participants expressed concern about limited opportunities, weak institutional research incentives, or uncertain career pathways. As one researcher reflected, "I learned a lot, but I don't know if I will have opportunities to continue." Without structured alumni mechanisms, or sustained institutional support, momentum may fade over time.

Despite these risks, survey responses suggest that many participants intend to continue research activities beyond the programme, indicating that the initiative has generated forward momentum, even where longer term conditions remain uncertain. Sustainable gains appeared in different forms. Some participants described paying forward their learning and increased visibility. One young researcher explained, "though I have not yet taken on a new (formal) leadership role, the fellowship increased my visibility, and therefore colleagues now consult me more often for methodological advice, or collaboration on research projects. I believe these effects will continue to grow over time." Others emphasized durable methodological competencies. As one noted, "through the programme I acquired knowledge of the computable general equilibrium model, which is now at the core of my research. I had no prior knowledge of it, and I still use it today in my thesis work."

Several respondents highlighted strengthened proposal writing and fundraising skills: "There were many important changes that will continue for me. I learned how to write a project and secure funding, which is essential for African researchers. Often we complain that projects are led by others, but do we take the time to write and apply? That learning was very important. I also improved methodological, data analysis, and group management skills, all of which I will continue to use."

Finally, sustained collaboration was cited as a source of continuity. One participant shared, "we had the chance to meet and collaborate with other researchers. We exchanged ideas, shared experiences, and discussed our respective projects. These interactions were beneficial, and I believe similar collaboration will continue in the future." Another noted ongoing engagement with their mentor: "I am currently co-authoring an article with my mentor. We remain in contact, and he continues to support my career. He is still available for discussions and has promised to share future opportunities. This collaboration will continue."

### **Budget structure and approval processes constrained research flexibility and methodological adaptation.**

Beyond disbursement timing, participants identified constraints related to budget structure, allowable expense categories, and approval procedures, which affected research quality and adaptability. Several respondents noted difficulty in aligning activity based research planning, with percentage based disbursement modalities. As one explained, "I didn't know that the funding was project based, with budget lines to be respected. It was difficult to

adapt the budget to GDN's budget planning." Another added, "GDN makes disbursements on a percentage basis, but research requires funding aligned with activity planning. For others it was how the GDN disbursements were structured, "Sometimes we budgeted two or three million CFA for fieldwork, but only 3,000 euros were disbursed. We often had to cover the gap ourselves."

Communication delays further compounded these constraints. One participant from Côte d'Ivoire noted that "communication about funding sometimes came late, and there were delays in disbursements. The amount disbursed was sometimes lower than what had been budgeted for certain activities." Others described broader financial uncertainty: "Some parts of the financing were difficult because when I applied, I did not fully understand the budget structure and constraints."

Several researchers also reported that specific budget lines were rejected or reduced, particularly for equipment, contextual support, or local mentoring, despite them viewing these as essential to strengthening methodological rigor. As one participant noted, "there were funding limitations, including rejected budget lines for equipment and local mentors."

Several of the young researchers were able to take full advantage of the mobility grant, as one respondent stated, "another form of GDN support that was extremely valuable was the mobility grant. Thanks to this funding, I was able to travel to Senegal, Burkina Faso, Tunisia, and even Clermont-Ferrand. During these visits, I interacted with researchers who helped me deepen my understanding of my topic." However, in other cases, travel or training allocations were not fully utilized due to inadequate funding, planning gaps, or delayed approvals: limiting exposure to external learning opportunities. These constraints reduced researchers' ability to adapt research design to field realities, or to invest in complementary expertise that could have enhanced analytical depth.

Participants also described administrative amendment processes as complex and time-consuming. Once budgets were approved, modifications required additional procedural steps, reducing responsiveness to unforeseen challenges or emerging methodological needs. For early-career researchers managing a grant independently for the first time, this rigidity increased administrative burden and constrained adaptive experimentation. While the programme strengthened managerial capacity, limited budget flexibility moderated opportunities for iterative refinement. These findings suggest that competitive research development depends not only on technical mentorship, but also on financial structures that allow for adaptive learning and methodological adjustment. Greater built-in flexibility and streamlined amendment procedures could enhance research quality and long-term competitiveness.

## 6. Lessons Learned

**Early-career research capacity is strengthened most effectively when support models integrate technical, managerial, and psychological dimensions of learning.** This lesson is also reflected in survey responses, where participants consistently highlighted confidence, mentorship, and practical guidance as equally important contributors to their development. One of the most important lessons emerging from the programme is that young researchers need more than academic skills to succeed: they also need confidence, reassurance, and a sense of professional legitimacy. This holistic approach proved foundational. Mentoring helped researchers overcome self-doubt, break down complex tasks, navigate decision-making, and feel capable of producing credible research. When researchers received ongoing guidance, feedback on drafts, support in managing budgets, and encouragement during moments of uncertainty, they progressed faster and produced higher-quality outputs. In contrast, when psychological support or structured guidance was missing, researchers reported feeling overwhelmed or hesitant, even when the financial resources were available. This demonstrates that technical inputs alone cannot guarantee impact: the emotional support provided by mentors and GDN teams is equally critical for early-career success.

**Impact is strongest when research topics align with national priorities and resonate with emerging development debates.** The programme's design intentionally avoided prescribing themes, allowing researchers to select topics meaningful to their contexts. This flexibility increased the relevance of research outputs, because participants often chose problems directly linked to national development needs, governance challenges, youth issues, or sectoral policy gaps. When projects aligned closely with local or national concerns, they attracted stronger interest from policymakers, practitioners, and academic peers. These were also the projects most likely to be submitted to journals, presented at conferences, or used in applied contexts. Conversely, when topics were chosen without a clear link to broader debates, visibility and uptake were weaker. This suggests that even within flexible programme structures, guidance on policy relevance may help researchers better position their work for impact.

**Mentoring is transformative when coherently matched and consistently delivered, but uneven mentor-mentee alignment limits programme effectiveness. Survey responses similarly reflect variation in mentoring experiences, reinforcing the importance of thematic alignment and regular engagement.** Strong mentor-mentee matches accelerated learning, improved research quality, and increased confidence. Researchers reported that well-aligned mentors "opened new intellectual horizons," helped them refine their thoughts, and taught them how to structure publishable papers. When mentorship was less coherent due to thematic mismatch, communication issues, or inconsistent availability, researchers experienced slower progress and weaker outcomes. These discrepancies underline the importance of establishing a tailored and structured matching process,

clearer communication expectations, and periodic check-ins to ensure mentoring remains relevant and responsive.

**Institutional environments shape young researchers' experience and outcomes, underscoring that individual capacity building must happen alongside organizational capacity building.** Despite the program directly targeting individuals, their success was heavily shaped by the strength of the existing institutional systems around them. Institutions with active laboratories, supportive supervisors, and functional administrative processes created an enabling environment where young researchers could focus on research rather than bureaucratic obstacles. One participant described this clearly, saying "I progressed because my laboratory supported me at every step." However, when institutions lacked administrative ability or struggled with internal communication, researchers reported navigating bottlenecks that ultimately undermined both their progress and their overall motivation. Future programmes should treat institutional strengthening and individual capacity building as interdependent components, rather than parallel activities.

**Peer learning and cohort identity enhance motivation, sustained engagement, and research quality and should be intentionally structured into future programming.** Across institutions, young researchers emphasized that interacting with peers, whether through proposal workshops, scientific days, or symposiums, was just as valuable as mentorship. These peer-learning opportunities allowed participants to compare approaches, exchange feedback, identify common challenges, and feel part of a larger research community. As one participant expressed, "Knowing others were struggling and succeeding like me made me continue." A cohort dynamic also increased accountability: participants worked harder when they knew their work would be reviewed or presented publicly.

**Sustainability cannot be assumed and requires deliberate structural anchoring beyond one grant cycle.** The programme successfully built foundations for long-term growth, helping researchers to strengthen their skills, visibility, confidence, and outputs. Despite this, many expressed concerns about maintaining progress after GDN support ended. This highlights the key to sustainability being whether institutions can integrate these researchers into ongoing projects, provide follow-up mentoring, or support additional research cycles. Similarly, networks built during the programme need to be intentionally supported. Without structured communication platforms or planned exchanges, relationships may fade, reducing the long-term impact of programme investments.

## 7. Recommendations

**Strengthen the selection and matching process for mentors to ensure thematic coherence, availability, and communication quality.** Given the centrality of mentorship to reported programme impact, future cycles should invest in a more structured matching process that considers thematic alignment, communication expectations, and the mentor's

capacity to engage consistently. GDN may consider developing a mentor competency framework, conducting early compatibility assessments, and establishing feedback loops to recalibrate potential mismatches. Mentoring contracts should also include minimum engagement requirements and opportunities for synchronous interaction, ensuring that all participants receive coherent support.

**Integrate training modules that complement mentorship and ensure minimum competency across core research and project-management skills.** While mentors provided individualized support, many researchers would benefit from standardized training in research design, data analysis, academic writing, research ethics, budgeting, and proposal development. Short, structured, modules delivered early in the programme would create a baseline of shared capacities and reduce disparities caused by mentor variability.

**Strengthen institutional engagement by formalizing roles for supervisors, administrative focal points, and research units.** To improve coherence and sustainability, institutions should be more formally involved in supporting young researchers. This could include designated administrative focal points (such as to streamline procurement), supervisors who coordinate with mentors, and research labs that specifically integrate activities into their scientific planning. These could be introduced as MOUs and would help clarify expectations and ensure consistent support.

**Create structured research dissemination pathways that support visibility, career competitiveness, and policy relevance.** Given the programme's emphasis on impact, GDN should expand the number and type of dissemination opportunities available to young researchers. These could include planned regional symposiums, workshops, partnerships with research platforms, or other communications pathways such as social media, podcasts, or relationships with national media platforms.

**Establish a peer-learning network to sustain momentum and create long-term professional communities.** To extend the programme's impact beyond the initial grant period, GDN should create a structured platform where former grantees can exchange opportunities, share research outputs, collaborate on publications, and receive periodic training updates. This network would serve as a long-term sustainability mechanism, ensuring that investments in early-career researchers continue to generate regional value long after the grant ends.

**Provide targeted support for career development and competitive positioning.** Because competitiveness is a key measure of programme success, future cycles should include: workshops on CV creation and professional profile development; scholarships, fellowships, and grants application guidance; interview preparation; as well as dissemination of opportunities for funding or job postings.

**Strengthen monitoring tools that capture research competence, career outcomes, and systemic barriers.** To better assess impact, GDN could develop a monitoring framework to include self-assessment opportunities for both researchers and institutions, mentor evaluations, grading of institutional readiness, as well as a list of reported obstacles to implementation or lessons learned. This would help to develop a clearer understanding of wider systemic issues and how to best support all actors in the program cycle. Finally, building on lessons from survey results, future monitoring frameworks should integrate

participant self-assessments alongside qualitative interviews to systematically track career trajectories and sustainability outcomes.