

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

Case Study: Think Tank
Strengthening in the Sahel

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hello@hwefa.com



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Acronyms

AFD	Agence Française de Développement
DRA	Doing Research Assessments
GDN	Global Development Network
IRCB	Institutional Research Capacity Building
KII	Key Informant Interview

Executive Summary

This case study examines the Savoirs Sahel 2 initiative, implemented by the Global Development Network (GDN) between 2021 and 2025, with a focus on strengthening think tanks across the Sahel. The programme forms part of a broader, multi-initiative effort to reinforce research capacity, policy engagement, and ecosystem development in Francophone Africa.

Purpose and Approach

The case study explores how participating think tanks define and pursue “impact,” assesses what has worked in programme design and implementation, identifies key challenges, and highlights opportunities for greater alignment across GDN’s portfolio. It draws on document review and 13 key informant interviews with programme stakeholders.

Key Findings

A flexible, demand-driven model strengthened ownership and relevance: The programme’s design allowed think tanks to work on nationally relevant priorities rather than externally imposed agendas. This significantly strengthened institutional ownership, legitimacy, and alignment with policy debates. Structured entry points such as evidence fairs and dissemination platforms helped organizations access audiences they had not previously reached.

Capacity strengthening was effective when embedded in practice: Learning-by-doing proved to be a strong model. Think tanks improved project management, research planning, and communication practices through direct implementation of funded activities. Mentoring played an important role in translating learning into practice, though its effectiveness varied depending on consistency, trust, and modality.

Visibility and credibility increased, but unevenly: The programme strengthened think tanks’ ability to communicate research and engage policy actors. Many reported increased recognition, invitations to contribute to policy discussions, and stronger positioning within national ecosystems. However, gains were more sustained where engagement was continuous and strategically embedded rather than event-driven.

Peer learning built confidence and legitimacy: Peer exchange mechanisms, particularly early-stage proposal workshops and regional convenings, helped reduce isolation and strengthen institutional confidence. While these spaces fostered mutual recognition, they led to limited sustained collaboration without dedicated structures or incentives.

Small grants acted as catalytic enablers: Although modest in size, grants enabled experimentation, institutional strengthening, and demonstration of capability. For many think tanks, this was a first opportunity to manage structured funding and produce visible outputs.

Key Challenges

Programme duration was too short for lasting institutional change: While the programme accelerated outputs and visibility, gains were often fragile. Institutional transformation requires longer-term support, particularly in fragile contexts with limited resources.

Mentoring quality was uneven: Mentoring was widely valued but inconsistently delivered. Limited in-person engagement, unclear expectations, and reliance on virtual interactions reduced its depth and effectiveness in some cases.

Capacity gains were not always institutionalized: Skills often remained concentrated among individuals rather than embedded across organizations, particularly in smaller or less structured think tanks.

Political and security constraints shaped outcomes: Restricted civic space and instability limited open engagement and influenced how think tanks exercised influence, often requiring indirect or low-risk strategies.

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 (Savoirs Sahel 2):** Supporting seven think tanks with grants and mentoring, to increase their influence on public and policy debates.
5. **Training in Research Communication (GlobalDev):** Addressing gaps in outreach through targeted training and the use of GlobalDev as a dissemination platform.

1.1 Case Study Purpose and Scope

Purpose

The purpose of this case study is to provide a focused, in-depth, examination of the Savoirs Sahel 2 (component II) programme, as one component of GDN's broader portfolio in Francophone Africa. The case study aims to deepen understanding of how impact is defined by the participating think tanks, as well as how it is pursued, and evidenced.

Specifically, the case study seeks to:

- Examine how "impact" is understood and operationalized within Savoirs Sahel, including the pathways through which think tanks influence policy, public debate, and research ecosystems.
- Document what has worked well in the design and implementation of Savoirs Sahel, including support modalities, capacity strengthening approaches, and engagement strategies.

- Identify key challenges and constraints faced by the programme at institutional, contextual, and programmatic levels.
- Explore opportunities to better align Savoirs Sahel with GDN's other initiatives in Francophone Africa, and to strengthen complementarities and synergies across the portfolio.

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 Savoirs Sahel programme, more specifically its implementation during the evaluation period from 2021 to 2025. It focuses on programme-level design, implementation processes, and early-to-emerging outcomes, rather than attempting to attribute long-term policy change. The case study will:

- Focus specifically on think tanks supported under Savoirs Sahel, examining institutional capacity strengthening, knowledge mediation, production, and uptake, policy engagement, and ecosystem positioning.
- Analyze definitions and markers of impact used within the programme, including formal indicators, as well as less tangible forms of influence (such as agenda-setting, network-building, and credibility with policy actors).
- Assess successes and challenges across different contexts within the Sahel, while remaining attentive to the political, security, and institutional constraints that shape think tank work.
- Consider Savoirs Sahel's interaction with other GDN initiatives, identifying areas of overlap, fragmentation, or missed opportunities for collaboration and shared learning.

The case study does not aim to provide a comprehensive assessment of all GDN programmes, nor to compare performance across initiatives. Instead, it offers a concentrated lens on think tank strengthening as a distinct intervention type: generating lessons that can inform both Savoirs Sahel's future direction and GDN's wider ecosystem-level approach in Francophone Africa.

2. Context: Savoirs Sahel 2

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

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

Funded by the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) (EUR 980,000), the initiative provides grants ranging from EUR 20,000 to EUR 80,000 for activities lasting 12 to 18 months. It is structured around two main components: (1) institutional capacity building, and (2) support for networking through regional fairs that create spaces for exchange on key issues addressed by think tanks. These activities aim to foster partnerships among think tanks and create opportunities for engagement with national, regional, and international institutional actors. Designed as a capacity-strengthening and positioning initiative rather than a narrowly defined research project, it is grounded in core principles of flexibility, ownership, and gradual institutional development. By providing relatively modest but catalytic resources, the programme enables think tanks to invest in often underfunded areas such as agenda-setting, communication, networking, and internal professionalization.

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

grounded evidence and facilitating dialogue between think tanks, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

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

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

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

3. Evaluation Questions for Savoirs Sahel 2

- How do participating think tanks define impact within the Savoirs Sahel 2 initiative, and to what extent has the programme supported them in achieving it?
- What elements of the Savoirs Sahel 2 model have worked well in strengthening think tank capacity, influence, and visibility?
- What challenges have think tanks encountered in implementing the Savoirs Sahel 2 initiative, and what factors have contributed to these challenges?
- How can the Savoirs Sahel 2 be better aligned with GDN's other programmes, and what opportunities exist to strengthen synergies and cross-initiative learning?

4. Methodology

4.1 Methods

Document Review: A systematic desk review was conducted of programme documents, including: evidence fairs documents, institutional capacity-building plans, think tank 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 13 semi-structured interviews with Savoirs Sahel 2 stakeholders. Interviews were tailored to the initiative’s logic and outcome areas, and conducted in French.

Table 1. Evaluation Sample - Stakeholder type

Programme	GDN Staff	Mentors	Grantees	Donor	Total Stakeholders
Savoirs Sahel 2	1	2	8	2	13

5. Findings

EQ: What elements of the Savoirs Sahel 2 model have worked well in strengthening think tank capacity, influence, and visibility?

The findings below highlight complementary design, resourcing, and implementation elements that contributed to programme outcomes.

Finding: A demand-driven and flexible design strengthened ownership and relevance.

Across participating think tanks, interviewees consistently emphasized that Savoirs Sahel 2 responded to structural constraints that limited their ability to produce and disseminate policy-relevant research. Many described a funding environment dominated by short-term, narrow, and donor-driven opportunities, which left little space for institutional development, agenda-setting, or experimentation. In this context, the programme’s flexible design was widely viewed as highly relevant, as it allowed organizations to work on issues already recognized as nationally important, rather than continuously adapting to external priorities. As one participant explained, this flexibility made it possible to “work on what we already knew mattered nationally, instead of constantly adapting to external calls,” strengthening both ownership and relevance.

By inviting think tanks to propose projects aligned with their existing mandates and expertise, rather than imposing predefined themes or methodologies, Savoirs Sahel 2 enabled organizations to deepen their work and position their outputs as credible contributions to ongoing policy debates. This alignment enhanced legitimacy with public

actors, who were more receptive to research and dialogue perceived as locally grounded (rather than externally driven).

“What mattered for us is that we were not asked to change our agenda. We were supported to do better what we already believed was important.”

Relevance was further reinforced by the programme’s attention to visibility and policy engagement as core capacity gaps. Think tanks described longstanding difficulties accessing decision-makers, media platforms, and regional policy networks, despite producing high-quality analysis. Through knowledge fairs, dissemination events, and curated dialogue spaces, *Savoirs Sahel 2* created entry points that many organizations had not previously accessed, often representing their first sustained exposure to national or regional policy audiences.

At the same time, the extent to which relevance translated into broader influence varied by institutional maturity and political context. More established think tanks were generally better positioned to integrate programme activities into longer-term strategies, while newer or smaller organizations sometimes struggled to do so, particularly in politically sensitive environments where policy engagement carries risk. In these cases, relevance at the organizational level remained high, even as opportunities for wider influence were more constrained.

The demand-driven design was reinforced by a structured and developmental selection process that combined competitive review with early capacity support, including proposal feedback webinars and an in-person proposal development workshop in Abidjan. This approach enabled think tanks to refine and strengthen their ideas, rather than being excluded for initial weaknesses: reinforcing ownership while maintaining rigor.

Finding: The initiative was effective in strengthening organizational practices through learning-by-doing, with outcomes shaped by baseline capacity and mentoring conditions.

Savoirs Sahel 2 was effective in strengthening think tanks’ organizational capacities, primarily by linking capacity development to concrete outputs and real-time implementation. Rather than treating training as a stand-alone activity, the programme supported think tanks to apply new skills directly through the design and delivery of research projects, policy products, dissemination activities, and public engagements. This approach enabled organizations to strengthen research planning, internal coordination, and project execution, while producing tangible results.

Participants consistently described improvements in their ability to structure projects, manage timelines and budgets, clarify roles within teams, and deliver outputs more systematically. For several think tanks, participation in *Savoirs Sahel 2* introduced a more disciplined and professional way of working, moving away from informal or ad hoc practices toward clearer organizational routines.

“The programme forced us to professionalize not just as researchers, but as an organization.”

Mentoring played a critical enabling role in this process by helping think tanks translate learning into practice. Where mentoring relationships were sustained and responsive, mentors supported teams in refining research questions, improving the rigor and relevance of outputs, and making strategic choices about scope, sequencing, and engagement. Mentors also helped organizations navigate institutional and political constraints, reinforcing confidence and autonomy in managing activities.

"The mentor helped us see our work differently. Not just as research, but as influence."

In addition to technical accompaniment, mentoring also played an important confidence-building and relational role. Mentor feedback highlights that sustained, flexible engagement helps reinforce motivation, judgment, and professional identity, particularly in politically constrained environments where think tanks must balance visibility with caution. In at least one case, mentoring explicitly supported prioritizing analytical quality and political timing over output volume, recognizing that credibility and independence required strategic restraint, rather than constant production.

At the same time, effectiveness was uneven across participating organizations, and variation was strongly shaped by baseline institutional capacity and the quality of mentoring engagement. Think tanks with established internal structures, clearer leadership roles, and prior experience managing projects were better positioned to absorb and institutionalize new practices. In contrast, smaller or newer organizations with limited staffing, weak administrative systems, or unclear internal dynamics often required more intensive support than the programme could provide within its timeframe.

In these cases, mentoring was sometimes perceived as too light or insufficiently continuous, particularly where engagement was primarily virtual. Without regular follow-up or in-person interaction, it was more difficult to build trust, address deeper organizational challenges, or support sustained change beyond immediate project delivery.

Given that this was an initial iteration of this support model, and that participating organizations started from very different baselines, effectiveness is best understood in terms of progress in learning, confidence, and professional practice, rather than uniform or transformative institutional change. Overall, *Savoirs Sahel 2* demonstrated that embedding capacity strengthening within concrete outputs is an effective approach, while also highlighting the importance of aligning intensity and duration of support with organizational maturity. These internal gains in practice and confidence created the foundation for more visible and credible external engagement.

Finding: The programme strengthened visibility through structured communication and dissemination mechanisms.

Savoirs Sahel 2 strengthened think tank visibility by deliberately supporting how research was communicated and circulated, rather than assuming that quality analysis would automatically find an audience. Many participating think tanks described having produced research prior to the programme, but with limited reach beyond closed professional circles. The programme addressed this gap by investing in communication skills,

dissemination tools, and structured platforms for engagement. Support for communication enabled think tanks to package their work more strategically via policy briefs, visual products, websites, media engagement, and public events. For several organizations, this represented a shift from sporadic or informal outreach, to a more intentional and professional external presence. In addition, improved communication practices helped make research outputs more accessible to non-academic audiences, including policymakers, journalists, and civil society actors.

Illustrative Example: From Capacity Building to Policy Engagement

We strengthened our capacity to produce policy briefs and bulletins, and improved advocacy skills among our young researchers. This allowed us to conduct targeted awareness-raising activities with public officials, civil society, development partners, and financial institutions.

A key result was the creation of a monitoring unit on demographic dividend issues. While existing reports were highly technical, we translated them into accessible formats and engaged directly with users to explain their relevance. This enabled us to reach decision-makers more effectively and contribute to concrete policy discussions.

For example, we influenced the Ministry of Higher Education to recognize the importance of women's education and employment in harnessing the demographic dividend, which led to measures promoting women's access to higher education.

Through these efforts, we have been able to move beyond research production to actively engaging decision-makers and supporting the uptake of evidence in public policy.

In parallel, *Savoirs Sahel 2* created structured opportunities for exposure through dissemination events, Evidence Fairs, and regional exchanges. These platforms functioned as entry points into policy and knowledge spaces that many think tanks had not previously accessed, particularly at the regional level. Participation in these forums allowed organizations to present their work publicly, test messages with diverse audiences, and situate themselves within broader policy debates.

As a result, participating think tanks reported clear gains in external recognition and credibility. Many described increased engagement with media, invitations to contribute to policy discussions, and greater visibility among peers, donors, and institutional actors. For several organizations, this was the first time their work reached audiences beyond their immediate networks. For example, a think tank in Burkina Faso stated:

"After these activities, people started calling us for analysis. That never happened before."

Evidence from programme implementation further suggests that visibility gains were most durable where they were linked to consistent formats and partnerships with recognized institutions, rather than one-off outputs. In these cases, repeated engagement through

established platforms helped reinforce credibility and position think tanks as reliable policy interlocutors over time.

Illustrative Example: Building Visibility Through Consistent Engagement

We did not just produce a single report or output. We maintained ongoing engagement on decentralisation by organizing multi-stakeholder dialogues and contributing to national-level discussions over time. Even in a context where this issue was not a government priority, we were able to keep the debate alive and position ourselves as a relevant actor.

Our work fed into a national conference on decentralisation, where several of our recommendations were taken into account. By engaging repeatedly through these dialogue spaces and working closely with public institutions, we strengthened our credibility and became a recognized facilitator between government, civil society, and researchers.

This continuous presence allowed decision-makers to increasingly refer to our work and involve us in discussions, rather than engaging with us on a one-off basis.

These visibility gains also translated into less tangible, but still significant, changes in confidence and positioning. Think tanks reported feeling more legitimate in asserting their expertise, engaging publicly, and approaching policymakers or partners. Association with a regional programme further reinforced institutional credibility, particularly for newer or smaller organizations seeking to distinguish themselves in crowded or opaque civic spaces.

At the same time, outcomes varied by context. In politically unstable or constrained environments, public engagement remained limited, and influence was often exercised through informal or discreet channels rather than open debate. In addition, visibility gains were frequently linked to programme-supported events rather than embedded in long-term communication strategies, raising questions about sustainability once external support ends.

Finding: Peer learning was most effective when embedded across the programme cycle, particularly when introduced upstream during proposal development.

Peer learning was not incidental to the Savoirs Sahel 2 model, but deliberately embedded at multiple stages of programme design and implementation. Early peer-learning mechanisms, particularly during proposal development, played a critical role in strengthening both project quality and institutional self-awareness. The in-person proposal development workshop in Abidjan combined self-assessment exercises, peer critique of draft proposals, and collective reflection on independence, credibility, governance, and influence. This upstream engagement enabled think tanks to refine ideas, benchmark themselves against peers, and clarify institutional positioning before implementation began.

Downstream regional activities, particularly Evidence Fairs (2) and cross-country meetings (4), played an important role in strengthening think tanks' sense of legitimacy within a peer community, rather than primarily expanding their external visibility. These spaces allowed organizations to present their work to comparable institutions, receive informed feedback, and situate themselves within a broader regional landscape of policy research actors facing similar constraints.

Participation in the Evidence Fairs helped to reduce the sense of isolation frequently described by Sahelian think tanks operating in fragile or politically constrained environments. Engaging with peers from other countries enabled organizations to benchmark their work, normalize shared challenges, and recognize that their constraints were not unique or indicative of underperformance.

"Seeing what others were doing made us realize that we were not behind. It gave us confidence and new ideas."

These convenings also reinforced a sense of belonging to a wider research and policy ecosystem, strengthening professional identity and confidence. For several participants, this peer validation was as important as any external recognition, particularly for newer or smaller organizations still consolidating their institutional footing.

While some connections initiated through these forums led to follow-up exchanges or collaboration, the primary value of peer learning lay in its contribution to mutual recognition, confidence-building, and institutional self-positioning, rather than sustained joint action. Even where collaboration did not continue, participants consistently described these interactions as legitimizing and motivating, reinforcing their role as credible actors within a regional community of practice.

Finding: Small catalytic grants enabled momentum and experimentation.

Although grant sizes were modest, they were widely described as catalytic, particularly in contexts where even limited flexible funding can support targeted forms of institutional, programmatic, and relational change. In practice, this included strengthening core capacities such as data systems, analytical tools, and staff skills; piloting new functions and formats such as policy briefs, monitoring units, and more accessible knowledge products; and enabling more consistent engagement with decision-makers through dialogues and multi-stakeholder platforms. It also contributed to increased visibility and credibility, as well as the development of new partnerships and networks, in some cases laying the groundwork for follow-on initiatives beyond the project period.

Savoirs Sahel 2 funding enabled think tanks to test new approaches, scale existing work, and demonstrate their capacity to deliver quality outputs on time. For several organizations, this was the first opportunity to manage a competitive, externally funded grant with defined deliverables, timelines, and reporting requirements. The ability to point to completed products and documented results also supported subsequent engagement with partners and funders.

"It was not a big amount, but it allowed us to show what we are capable of doing."

This catalytic funding created the conditions under which learning-by-doing and organizational strengthening could take place.

EQ: What challenges have think tanks encountered in implementing the Savoirs Sahel 2 initiative, and what factors have contributed to these challenges?

Finding: Programme timelines were too short to support durable institutional change.

Across interviews, a central challenge relates to the misalignment between the programme's duration and the depth of institutional change expected of participating think tanks. While Savoirs Sahel 2 enabled organizations to accelerate activities, increase output volume, and gain visibility within a relatively short period, these gains were often described as fragile and difficult to sustain once project funding ended. Think tanks emphasized that institutional strengthening, such as improving governance practices, embedding strategic communication routines, or consolidating policy positioning, requires sustained engagement over multiple years. This is particularly true in environments where organizations are already operating under financial and political strain.

The short timeframe thus interacted with the structural fragility of many Sahelian think tanks, operating with small teams, limited reserves, and high reliance on external funding. As a result, organizations often had to prioritize delivery and visibility during the project period, leaving little space for reflection, internal consolidation, or gradual institutionalization of new practices.

"The programme helped us accelerate, but acceleration is not the same as consolidation. When the project ended, the question was how to continue at the same level."

This challenge reflects a broader tension between catalytic programme design and the slower, more cumulative nature of organizational change in fragile research ecosystems. It also raises questions about the role of international funding in think tanks' business models, particularly whether short-term, project-based support is best suited to strengthening institutional capacities, or whether more sustained and flexible funding is needed to support long-term positioning and impact.

Finding: Sustainability and core funding constraints remained largely unresolved.

Despite gains in capacity, visibility, and confidence, most think tanks reported that structural sustainability challenges persisted beyond the programme. While Savoirs Sahel 2 funding enabled organizations to demonstrate their capabilities and produce concrete outputs, it did not fundamentally alter the funding conditions in which they operate. Many continued to rely on short-term, project-based funding, limiting their ability to retain staff, maintain consistent production, or invest in longer-term strategic development. Several respondents emphasized the continued difficulty of securing stable, multi-year funding and translating increased visibility and credibility into sustained financial support.

The programme created limited space to engage with these structural constraints, either at the level of individual think tanks or across the cohort. While elements such as mentoring, networking, and visibility activities contributed indirectly to strengthening positioning, there were no explicit mechanisms to support access to follow-on funding, engage with donors, or strengthen think tanks' longer-term financing strategies. As a result, the programme primarily operated within, rather than addressing, the broader funding conditions shaping think tank sustainability.

This gap reflects several interacting factors operating at different levels. At the programme level, relatively short grant durations and modest funding limited the scope for sustained institutional support. At the ecosystem level, weak national funding environments and donor preferences for larger international actors constrained opportunities for locally rooted think tanks. At the organizational level, varying degrees of institutional maturity also shaped how effectively think tanks could leverage the grant to build longer-term funding relationships.

"We proved what we can do, but proving capacity does not automatically bring the next funder. There is still a gap between credibility and financial stability."

These findings suggest that while the grant-based model was effective in strengthening short-term performance and enabling demonstration effects, it was not designed to resolve structural sustainability challenges. Its effectiveness varied depending on the maturity and positioning of the think tank: more established organizations were better able to leverage the grant to expand networks and pursue additional opportunities, whereas less mature organizations benefited in terms of capacity but faced greater difficulty translating these gains into durable funding pathways.

As a result, Savoirs Sahel 2 strengthened the "front end" of think tank performance without resolving the structural conditions needed to sustain that performance over time.

Finding: The mentoring model was valued, but unevenly effective in practice.

Mentoring emerged as one of the most appreciated elements of the Savoirs Sahel 2 model, yet its effectiveness varied significantly across contexts and organizations. Where mentoring relationships were regular, trust-based, and responsive to institutional needs, they contributed meaningfully to improved project design, methodological clarity, and strategic positioning. However, in other cases, mentoring remained episodic and largely compliance-driven, limiting its developmental value.

Several mentors attributed this unevenness to a combination of factors, including unclear expectations around the mentor's role, limited time availability among think tank leadership, and the predominance of virtual engagement. In contexts with weak connectivity or strong cultural preferences for face-to-face interaction, virtual mentoring made it difficult to build trust, understand institutional dynamics, or shift behavior beyond document review.

"Sometimes they came to me only when they had to submit a report. That's not mentoring, that's validation."

The absence of budgeted in-person mentoring further reinforced these limitations, even though both mentors and think tanks consistently noted that brief field visits significantly strengthened the quality and impact of the relationship.

Finding: Monitoring and evaluation systems matured during implementation, limiting real-time learning.

While monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plans were required at the outset of the programme, their implementation and use varied across grantees. In practice, M&E systems were often developed or consolidated progressively during implementation rather than operationalized from the beginning. This pattern was observed across several cases, although not uniformly.

At the grantee level, this meant that monitoring tended to focus primarily on activity completion and output delivery, with more limited attention to tracking relational, reputational, or influence-related outcomes as they evolved. While some think tanks updated their M&E approaches in discussion with mentors, this was not consistently applied, and in several cases mentoring did not include structured support on defining or tracking institutional or policy influence outcomes.

At the programme level, the absence of a consolidated M&E system and limited aggregation of data across projects further constrained the ability to capture emerging results and learning in real time. As a result, opportunities to document and reflect on how visibility, partnerships, and policy engagement were developing during implementation were only partially realized.

Finding: Capacity gains were not always diffused across organizations due to internal institutional constraints.

Capacity gains were not always diffused across organizations due to internal institutional constraints. While capacity-building activities strengthened individual skills, particularly in research methods, advocacy, and communication, these gains did not consistently translate into organization-wide change. Data from the grantee interviews suggests that this pattern was observed in approximately 40% of cases, particularly among newer or less institutionalized think tanks. In these instances, new practices remained concentrated among a small number of individuals, limiting their wider institutional reach.

This was particularly evident in areas such as communication, where implementation was sometimes carried by a specific team or focal person rather than embedded across the organization. By contrast, more established organizations with stronger internal structures were better able to integrate new tools and practices into their routines.

This pattern was shaped by internal organizational dynamics, including evolving governance structures, high workloads, and limited mechanisms for internal knowledge sharing. Small team sizes and founder-led governance models meant that even well-designed tools or strategies required deliberate internal processes to be effectively institutionalized

While capacity-building activities strengthened individual skills, particularly in research methods, advocacy, and communication, these gains did not always translate into organization-wide change. In several cases, new practices remained concentrated among a small number of individuals, limiting their wider institutional reach. This was particularly evident in communication strategies, where implementation depended heavily on one focal person rather than collective ownership.

This pattern was shaped by internal organizational dynamics, including centralized decision-making, high workloads, and limited mechanisms for internal knowledge sharing. Small team sizes and founder-led governance structures meant that even well-designed tools or strategies struggled to gain traction without deliberate internal processes to support diffusion and accountability.

“We had the tools and the plan, but without collective engagement, only a small part of it could actually happen.”

As a result, capacity strengthening often improved individual competence without fully reshaping institutional routines or culture.

Finding: Political and security constraints limited the exercise of capacity and influence, while also reshaping how think tanks position themselves within the research–policy ecosystem.

Political instability, insecurity, and shrinking civic spaces posed significant challenges to programme implementation in several contexts. Think tanks reported difficulties accessing field sites, engaging openly with stakeholders, and sustaining dialogue on politically sensitive issues. In some cases, public officials and local actors were reluctant to participate, slowing implementation or limiting the scope of activities.

Think tanks often responded by shifting to indirect data collection, narrowing geographic coverage, or reframing engagement strategies to prioritize dialogue, awareness-raising, and technically framed outputs over more explicit advocacy.

“It wasn’t a methodological problem. People were simply afraid to speak, and sometimes we had to slow down or change our approach.”

These adaptations did not only affect implementation, but also influenced how think tanks positioned themselves within the research–policy ecosystem. In more constrained environments, organizations tended to adopt lower-risk entry points, emphasizing technical expertise, neutral framing, and relationship-building over overtly policy-oriented or advocacy-driven engagement. While this approach enabled continued access and maintained credibility with certain stakeholders, it also limited the extent to which think tanks could engage in more politically sensitive or transformative policy processes.

The flexible nature of the funding played a dual role in this context. On one hand, it allowed think tanks to adapt their approaches in response to evolving constraints and maintain a level of activity despite difficult conditions. On the other hand, the relatively short timeframe and project-based structure limited the ability of organizations to invest in longer-term strategies to navigate or shift these structural constraints.

As a result, while projects were largely implemented, the depth and reach of influence remained shaped not only by internal capacity, but by the broader political and security environment in which think tanks operate.

Finding: Regional collaboration remained largely opportunistic, though targeted programme initiatives demonstrated its potential to become more structured.

Although regional convenings and Evidence Fairs were widely appreciated and created valuable spaces for exchange, sustained collaboration among think tanks remained limited. Many organizations reported that after initial interactions, they returned to working independently, with joint initiatives emerging primarily through personal relationships rather than structured programme mechanisms.

“We met, exchanged, and understood each other better, but then everyone went back to their own project.”

This pattern reflects both programme design choices and grantee priorities. While the programme combined demand-driven grants with regional convenings, the grants themselves were intentionally focused on institution-specific workplans and did not explicitly incentivize or resource cross-grantee collaboration. At the same time, most think tanks did not prioritize collaboration as a core component of their activities, instead focusing on advancing their own institutional agendas.

At the same time, evidence from later programme activities highlights the potential for more structured collaboration when deliberately facilitated. The 2025 Evidence Fair, for example, contributed to the emergence of a regional research agenda on digitalization and governance, which led to a call for expressions of interest supported by mini-grant funding. This initiative enabled collaborative literature reviews among six transnational pairs of think tanks. Two think tanks that met through the Fair developed a joint proposal, and four Savoires Sahel grantees were selected to participate in this collaborative work.

These examples suggest that while collaboration did not emerge organically at scale, it can be effectively catalyzed when supported by targeted mechanisms, dedicated resources, and a clear thematic focus. In other words, the programme successfully created initial connections and demonstrated the feasibility of joint work, but in the absence of consistent incentives and structured support across the grant cycle, collaboration remained dependent on specific initiatives rather than becoming a sustained feature of the network.

EQ: How do participating think tanks define impact within the Savoires Sahel 2 initiative, and to what extent has the programme supported them in achieving it?

Finding: For participating think tanks, impact is defined not only by visibility or policy uptake, but by the ability to navigate political constraints and exercise influence safely over time.

Across interviews, think tanks and mentors emphasized that impact in fragile and politically constrained environments cannot be equated with immediate policy change or public confrontation. Instead, impact is understood as the gradual consolidation of legitimacy, credibility, and strategic positioning that allows organizations to remain active, visible, and relevant without exposing themselves to political risk.

Several participants highlighted that influencing policy in their contexts requires discretion, indirect engagement, and long-term relationship building. One interviewee explained that impact comes from “knowing how far you can go, and when to stop.” Further noting that overt criticism or public advocacy can lead to exclusion or repression. Another reflected, “We are not activists. If we push too hard, we disappear. Influence here is about awareness, not confrontation.”

Savoirs Sahel 2 supported this form of impact by strengthening think tanks’ legitimacy and providing recognized platforms (such as Evidence Fairs) through which they could engage more safely with policymakers, peers, and the public. For some organizations, the programme enabled them to be seen as serious research actors, rather than political commentators. As one participant noted, “After this, we were invited more often. People listened differently. That is already an impact for us.”

Thus, at this stage, impact is best understood as enhanced capacity for sustained and risk-aware engagement, rather than measurable policy outcomes. The programme contributed to laying these foundations, even where overt influence remained constrained.

Finding: Impact remains emerging and cannot yet be measured through conventional outcome indicators.

While participants frequently described the programme as impactful, impact was largely understood as a process rather than a measurable outcome. Think tanks emphasized gains in credibility, legitimacy, and institutional confidence. Several described a shift in how they are perceived by policymakers, peers, and funders. One participant explained, “We are no longer seen as activists or commentators, we are seen as a serious research institution.”

At the individual level, researchers reported strengthened professional profiles, expanded networks, and improved career prospects. Participation in Savoirs Sahel 2 was credited as enhancing their ability to engage in future projects, consultancies, or leadership roles. As one researcher noted, “This experience changed how I present myself professionally.” These individual-level effects were often described as foundational, enabling longer-term influence even if immediate policy change was not observable.

The fact remains that systemic-level impact is difficult to assess. One GDN staff stated that impact has often been equated with activity completion, rather than outcomes, underscoring the need for clearer definitions and indicators. At this stage, impact is best characterized as laying groundwork for future influence, rather than producing immediate policy shifts.

EQ: How can the Savoirs Sahel 2 initiative be better aligned with GDN's other programmes, and what opportunities exist to strengthen synergies and cross-initiative learning?

Finding: Coherence across GDN-supported initiatives remains limited, reducing opportunities for synergy and cumulative impact.

Several interviewees, including programme leadership, observed that Savoirs Sahel 2 operates alongside other GDN-supported initiatives with limited strategic alignment. While participants valued individual programme components, they noted missed opportunities to connect research outputs, capacity-building activities, and regional platforms more systematically. As one think tank noted, "we see other programmes happening, but we don't always understand how they connect to ours." This fragmentation affected both efficiency and sustainability, with think tanks expressing interest in clearer pathways linking training, research production, dissemination, and follow-on funding.

Data from the evaluation further suggests that while Savoirs Sahel 2 shares strong conceptual alignment with other GDN initiatives, including IRCB Volet 1, IRCB Volet 2, and the DRA, these connections remain largely implicit rather than operationalized. As a result, initiatives contribute to a broader ecosystem of research capacity strengthening but are implemented in parallel, with limited structured interaction, leading to missed opportunities for cumulative learning and impact. Several opportunities exist to strengthen alignment and synergies across these initiatives:

Linking individual capacity building (IRCB Volet 2) with institutional strengthening (Savoirs Sahel 2): IRCB Volet 2 focuses on developing individual researchers through mentoring and learning-by-doing grants, while Savoirs Sahel 2 targets institutional capacity. Stronger alignment could be achieved by intentionally connecting these two levels. For example, IRCB researchers could be embedded within Savoirs Sahel think tanks, creating pathways for skills transfer, mentorship, and longer-term institutional anchoring of individual capacities.

Connecting institutional grants (IRCB Volet 1) with Savoirs Sahel's flexible, demand-driven model: Both IRCB Volet 1 and Savoirs Sahel support institutional development, but through different modalities. Greater coordination could help harmonize approaches to capacity strengthening, particularly around organizational systems, sustainability strategies, and research management. Joint learning spaces or shared guidance tools could support think tanks in navigating common challenges such as financial sustainability, governance, and positioning.

Leveraging DRA findings to inform targeted capacity strengthening: The DRA provides system-level diagnostics on national research ecosystems. However, these insights are not systematically fed into programme design or implementation. Aligning Savoirs Sahel activities with DRA findings could help ensure that capacity-building efforts respond to structural constraints identified at the country level, such as funding gaps, policy engagement barriers, or institutional weaknesses.

Creating structured cross-programme learning platforms: Across initiatives, learning remains largely project-specific and dispersed. Establishing regular, cross-initiative learning mechanisms such as joint workshops, thematic communities of practice, or shared knowledge platforms could facilitate exchange between IRCB fellows, Savoirs Sahel grantees, and DRA stakeholders. This would help move from isolated learning-by-doing to more collective, cumulative learning.

Enhancing internal coordination and strategic coherence within GDN: At an institutional level, stronger internal coordination across programme teams could help ensure that initiatives are designed and implemented as complementary components of a broader strategy, rather than as standalone interventions. This includes aligning objectives, sharing data and insights, and identifying opportunities for joint programming.

6. Lessons Learned

Relevance is strongest when programmes align with think tanks' existing agendas and institutional realities, but sustaining this relevance requires moving beyond project-based support toward a more ecosystem-oriented approach. Flexible funding enabled organizations to build on priorities they already considered nationally important, strengthening ownership, motivation, and legitimacy with local stakeholders. This was particularly important in politically sensitive environments, where externally imposed priorities can undermine trust and access. However, in a context where core funding from international donors is limited to a small number of well-established institutions, aligning with local agendas alone is not sufficient to ensure sustainability. Supporting a broader range of think tanks requires complementary strategies that go beyond short-term grants. This includes strengthening linkages between organizations, facilitating access to diversified funding sources, supporting intermediary functions such as networks and platforms, and investing in shared resources and capabilities across the ecosystem. An ecosystem approach would therefore combine demand-driven, institution-level support with mechanisms that enable collaboration, resource-sharing, and longer-term positioning within the research-policy landscape. This would allow programmes like Savoirs Sahel to support not only individual organizations, but also the broader conditions under which a more diverse and resilient think tank ecosystem can emerge.

Capacity strengthening is most effective when mentoring is tailored, sustained, and relational. Mentoring that combined technical guidance with organizational and strategic reflection enabled think tanks to professionalize their practices and gain confidence in navigating complex policy environments. Importantly, mentoring effectiveness depended not only on programme design, but on the quality of relationships, trust-building, and informal exchange. While virtual mentoring enabled continuity, exclusive reliance on remote engagement limited depth, particularly where institutional dynamics and political sensitivities required nuanced and contextual understanding. Where mentoring was lighter, episodic, or insufficiently adapted to local realities, gains were slower and more

fragile, underscoring the importance of clear expectations, sufficient engagement time, and relational investment.

Peer learning among mentors is an underutilized lever for programme coherence and quality. The absence of structured exchange among mentors limited opportunities for cross-project learning, alignment, and shared problem-solving. Mentor feedback suggests that collective spaces for mentors to reflect, compare approaches, and surface common challenges would strengthen consistency, adaptive learning, and overall programme quality, particularly in multi-country initiatives operating across diverse political and institutional contexts.

Impact for think tanks is relational and reputational before it is measurable. Participants defined impact primarily in terms of political credibility, visibility, and positioning rather than immediate policy change. In fragile or constrained environments, impact often takes the form of being recognized as a legitimate and reliable interlocutor, and maintaining space for engagement over time. Evaluation frameworks need to better reflect these pathways to influence in order to avoid undervaluing early-stage, relational, yet strategically significant outcomes.

Coherence across programmes enhances cumulative value and learning. Fragmentation across initiatives limits opportunities for reinforcement, sequencing, and scaling of capacity gains. Stronger alignment across GDN-supported programmes would allow learning, skills, and visibility developed in one initiative to feed into others, increasing efficiency, reinforcing institutional trajectories, and amplifying regional impact.

Sustainability depends on institutional anchoring and proportional programme design, not individual motivation alone. High motivation among participating think tanks was not sufficient to guarantee continuity beyond the project cycle. However, it is neither realistic nor desirable to position international funding as the primary backbone of long-term sustainability. Instead, sustainability requires a combination of strengthened organizational systems, diversified funding strategies, and strategic positioning within national and regional ecosystems. In this context, programmes like Savoirs Sahel can play a catalytic role by helping think tanks build credibility, develop partnerships, and access new opportunities, rather than attempting to provide sustained financial continuity. This includes supporting linkages to local and regional funders, enhancing visibility with policy actors, and strengthening internal systems that enable organizations to mobilize resources over time.

At the same time, for relatively small grants and mentoring-focused support, several interviewees pointed to a mismatch between the scale of funding and the administrative requirements. These included detailed reporting expectations, multiple validation steps, delays in feedback or approvals, and uneven mentor availability. For smaller or less institutionalized think tanks, these requirements placed a disproportionate burden on

limited staff capacity and, in some cases, slowed implementation or reduced the time available for core research and engagement activities. Mentors also noted that unclear expectations regarding their role and level of involvement created inefficiencies and, at times, frustration on both sides. Clearer upfront guidance on roles, timelines, and expectations, combined with more proportionate and streamlined administrative processes, would better align with the developmental intent of the model and reduce transaction costs for both mentors and participating organizations.

7. Recommendations

Preserve the demand-driven and flexible design, while introducing differentiated support pathways

The demand-driven and flexible design of Savoirs Sahel 2 has been central to strengthening ownership, relevance, and legitimacy among participating think tanks and should be preserved in future cycles. At the same time, findings show that organizations entered the programme with widely varying levels of institutional maturity and operated under different political constraints. Future phases should therefore introduce differentiated support pathways that calibrate expectations, intensity of accompaniment, and pacing based on baseline capacity. Early-stage or smaller think tanks may benefit from lighter output requirements combined with deeper organizational support, while more established organizations could be supported to pursue more ambitious policy engagement, regional collaboration, or ecosystem-level influence.

Extend programme duration or introduce phased engagement models that support consolidation and progression toward larger funding opportunities.

While Savoirs Sahel 2 successfully accelerated activity, visibility, and confidence, the programme timeframe was often too short to support durable institutional change. Future cycles could extend programme duration or adopt phased engagement models that separate an initial acceleration phase from a consolidation and progression phase.

In this model, an initial phase would continue to provide flexible, demand-driven support to enable experimentation, capacity strengthening, and proof of concept. A second phase would focus not only on institutionalization and sustainability planning, but also on positioning think tanks to access larger and more ambitious funding opportunities. This could include targeted support for proposal development, partnership-building, and engagement with a broader range of funders at national, regional, and international levels.

Such an approach would align with the programme's role in supporting organizations that currently have limited access to funding, by creating clearer pathways for them to "graduate" from small catalytic grants toward more sustained and diversified funding relationships. It would also better reflect the time and support required for think tanks to

move from initial experimentation to embedded practice and longer-term impact within fragile research ecosystems.

Strengthen the mentoring model through clearer expectations and in-person engagement.

Mentoring should be reinforced as a central developmental pillar, rather than an ancillary support function. Future cycles should clarify expectations around the mentoring role, including minimum engagement standards and a clear distinction between developmental support and compliance or quality control. Mentors should be supported and resourced to address not only research quality and project delivery, but also institutional positioning, internal governance dynamics, communication strategies, and sustainability planning beyond the programme cycle. Where feasible, modest allocations for in-person mentoring visits should be prioritized, as evidence shows that even limited face-to-face engagement significantly strengthens trust, contextual understanding, and institutional impact.

Support internal diffusion of capacity gains within think tanks.

Capacity strengthening under Savoirs Sahel 2 often improved individual skills, but did not always translate into organization-wide change. Future programme cycles should more explicitly support internal diffusion of learning by encouraging team-based approaches, internal knowledge-sharing mechanisms, and collective ownership of new tools and practices. This could be integrated into mentoring discussions and reporting expectations, with attention to how organizations are embedding learning into routines, roles, and decision-making processes (rather than relying on a small number of individuals).

Clarify and operationalize context-sensitive definitions of impact.

Participating think tanks define impact not in terms of immediate policy change, but as the gradual consolidation of legitimacy, credibility, and safe engagement in politically constrained environments. Future programme cycles should explicitly recognize this understanding by co-developing impact frameworks with participating organizations. These frameworks should capture early relational and positioning outcomes alongside longer-term policy influence, using clear and context-sensitive indicators. This would strengthen learning, evaluation, and strategic decision-making, while also aligning expectations with the realities of influence in fragile contexts.

Deepen the regional dimension through structured collaboration mechanisms.

Regional convenings successfully reduced isolation and strengthened peer legitimacy, but collaboration remained largely opportunistic. Future cycles should introduce more intentional mechanisms for regional collaboration, such as thematic clustering of projects, joint research windows, or facilitated communities of practice linked to shared policy

domains. Dedicated resources and light coordination support would help translate networking into more sustained collaboration, cumulative learning, and programme-level impact.

Strengthen coherence and learning across GDN-supported initiatives.

Findings point to missed opportunities for synergy across GDN-supported programmes. Future iterations of Savoirs Sahel 2 should be designed explicitly as a part of a broader GDN ecosystem: with clearer articulation of how capacity-building, research production, dissemination, and follow-on support connect across initiatives. Clearer pathways would enable organizations to build progressively, rather than restart with each programme, amplifying cumulative impact, reducing fragmentation, and increasing the potential for replication at scale.

Integrate sustainability planning as a core programmatic objective from the outset.

Despite gains in performance and credibility, sustainability remains fragile for many participating think tanks. Future programme cycles should integrate sustainability planning from the outset, including early identification of funding pathways, potential partnerships, and institutional anchors. Practical tools, structured guidance, and mentoring support that is focused on fundraising, partnership development, and organizational resilience would help bridge the gap between demonstrated capacity and longer-term viability. While structural funding constraints cannot be resolved by the programme alone, more explicit attention to sustainability would reduce the risk of post-programme decline.