MENTORING POLICY AND GUIDELINES AT GDN

INTRODUCTION

Mentorship is considered an effective way to help build the capacity of researchers "on the job," and an integral element of the Global Development Network's (GDN) research capacity building programs. All research and institutional capacity building activities at GDN involve mentoring throughout the grant cycle[1]. GDN's latest Independent Evaluation (2013) highlights the value of this service provided to its grantees, and advises on the need to further enhance its consistency and quality.

This document outlines the basic objectives and principles that govern mentoring at GDN, in the context of research capacity building in economics and social sciences, with the goal of better informed policy making and socio-economic development.

CHAPTER 1: DEFINITION

"Mentoring is a word widely used to describe the relationship between a novice (the protégé) and a more experienced individual (the mentor)...Having a trusted mentor is important at any career stage-but particularly during career transitions...Through mentoring, the protégé prepares for more rapid and successful career progression."[2]

"It (mentoring) is a partnership between two people (mentor and mentee) normally working in a similar field or sharing similar experiences. It is a helpful relationship based upon mutual trust and respect."[3]

The term 'Mentoring' is often used to capture the relationship between professors and students, or a relationship between a more senior and a junior colleague at the same institution. At GDN, in the vast majority of cases, the mentor *(from here on referred to as scientific advisor)* is from a different institution, and most often from a different country as well. For many researchers, this is the only opportunity to get feedback on their academic research or to receive expert unbiased advice on their methodology and analysis, access to relevant literature and resources, opportunities to present their work at international academic settings and (often) support in writing and to publish their findings.

[1] A grant cycle is the sequence of activities from the process of awarding a grant to the finalization of the research outputs and dissemination. It ranges from one year to three years, typically.

[2] Clifford, Philip S., Hobin JA., Fuhrmann CN., and Lindstaedt B. (2014) 'Getting the Mentoring You Need'. http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2014_01_30/caredit.a1400027.

[3] MentorSet: http://www.mentorset.org.uk/pages/mentoring.htm.

For GDN programs, mentoring is done in the context of a funded research project, for its duration. In other words, it is an association of the scientific advisor and the grantee during the hands-on research process under a specific grant.

CHAPTER 2: MENTORING APPROACH AT GDN

GDN's experience with mentoring has shown that engagement of a scientific advisor has helped early career researchers gain a solid research foundation and enhance their skills, in many cases learn "how to write" better, synthesize information or extract the most important findings. This is evident in the various (independent) GDN program evaluations and assessments that clearly indicate the value-addition of the mentoring process to research capacity building. The key is for this to happen as early as possible, once a grant is issued.

Over the years, with the implementation and evaluation of various projects and activities, GDN's approach towards mentoring has also evolved. The 'traditional' mentorship model, where a researcher or research team is linked with a scientific advisor who provides continuous guidance, support and direction through the research study, has been supplemented with additional interventions. For instance, opportunities to improve research proposals even before the final selection of grant recipients through expert guidance received at dedicated training workshops have helped researchers improve their capabilities and knowledge in a particular field, without formally being a part of GDN programs. Furthermore, peer-learning has helped weaker grantees progress during the course of their study, by sharing different approaches to overcome data constraints, or clearly define their research questions and the underlying framework of analysis. Such learning opportunities have strengthened GDN's research capacity building programs, ensuring that the stronger grantees take on the role of advisors for the weaker ones, increasing their own skills and capacities. This is done both at workshops and outside them, through bilateral visits. Additionally, intensive training during workshops on new research methods or analytical tools has often been used as a complement to the ongoing mentoring process.[4] Research communication strategies and tools have been included in these training workshops, with hands-on guidance to produce policy briefs, web write-ups, press releases or '2-minute elevator speeches.'

In line with the recommendation of the recently held Independent Evaluation, GDN is in the process of enhancing and increasing the role of the scientific advisors, to even guide and support grantees in getting their research published at the end of the grant cycle. This is being done through multiple ways, from including training sessions on publications in the workshops, to extending the mentorship agreement beyond the end of the grant per se to assist with the publication of the research, or to provide opportunities for the grantees to co-author with their scientific advisor, wherever possible.

CHAPTER 3: PROFILE OF A SCIENTIFIC ADVISOR AT GDN

At GDN, a scientific advisor is someone who:

- Is committed to GDN's research capacity building mission and objectives;
- Has relevant mentoring skills such as providing constructive feedback and coaching, is prompt in responding to queries, is approachable, supportive, motivational, inspirational, encouraging and challenging;

[4] For instance, under *the Strengthening Institutions to Improve Public Expenditure Accountability* Global Research Project, through annual global training workshops research teams were trained each year on a new analytical tool, such as program budgeting analysis, benefit incidence analysis, cost-effectiveness analysis or policy simulations.

- Has previous experience in supervising researcher(s)/research team(s) or graduate students;
- Has demonstrated academic research track record in the subject/topic (through previous publications and research projects, grants, thematic and geographical expertise);
- Has a broad set of skills and general working knowledge in the social sciences and economics (especially relevant for multidisciplinary teams). Can provide guidance, even if the topic is not fully aligned to her/his area of interest;
- Regards compliance with research ethical values and original work as paramount and guide the grantees on research ethics;
- Can connect academia to practice and has experience in engaging with both domains;
- Can support the grantee(s) in publishing research findings at the end of the grant cycle;
- Is proactive and interested in the grantee's research, including their research environment;
- Is open to unexpected developments in the country of implementation and corresponding revisions to the research plan if needed;
- Has the ability to travel and attend GDN-sponsored site visits, workshops and events.

Based on their involvement (level, duration, number of grantees mentored), GDN provides an honorarium to the scientific advisors. Furthermore, scientific advisors are compensated for their time and travel to workshops/events/site-visits organized by GDN.

CHAPTER 4: ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES: SCIENTIFIC ADVISOR, GRANTEE, GDN

4.1 Scientific Advisor

At GDN, a scientific advisor is expected to guide and support the grantees (researcher or research teams) at all stages of their research cycle, from revising and sharpening the research questions and design, to assessing the policy relevance of the research, to the production and quality control of the final outputs as well as the dissemination of the research results. During this process, scientific advisors are also expected to discuss any potential ethical issues surrounding the research proposal with their mentees and, where possible, to provide support towards the academic publication of outputs.

Specifically, a scientific advisor is expected to perform the following roles:

- To provide professional guidance and supervision to the grantees; inputs and suggestions to ensure feasibility, coherence and policy relevance of the research question(s), conceptual framework, research design, methodology and scope of the study;
- To support the grantees in strengthening the theoretical perspective and enhancing knowledge of available literature; to provide the grantees with suggestions and sources on relevant data;
- Where relevant, to support the grantees in integrating the country studies in order to produce a truly comparative inter-regional/cross-country research study;
- To guide the grantees in conducting research ethically and responsibly, in accordance with international norms and principles, and abiding by national laws;
- Where possible, to guide the grantees in their publication efforts and guide them in this process;
- Where possible, to assist the grantee to develop professional networks.

The responsibilities of a scientific advisor include:

- Verifying that the research results are of good quality, by reviewing and commenting on all (draft and final) reports submitted by the grantees;
- Ensuring that regular communication is maintained with GDN on the research progress and the kind of hands-on training the grantees could benefit from or additional support they may require;

- Maintaining regular communication (at least once a month and not always prompted by GDN) with the grantees. GDN must be included in all grantee-scientific advisor communications;
- Notifying GDN in case the grantee is unresponsive or uncommitted;
- Participating in workshops/events/site visits/team meetings, if and when required (expenses covered separately by GDN);
- Informing GDN immediately if for some reason s/he cannot carry out the assignment. In which case, the scientific advisor is responsible for providing alternate suggestions/solutions.

4.2 Grantee

GDN expects its grantees to work closely with their assigned scientific advisor throughout the grant cycle, to maintain an open and receptive approach to the advice received from the scientific advisor, respond to comments and suggestions in a professional manner and to adapt the research study accordingly when appropriate or feasible.

Specifically, a grantee is expected to perform the following role:

- To undertake and manage the research study in an ethical and financially viable manner;
- To apply best efforts and show greatest rigor in following research plans, collecting and processing data, and analyzing results;
- To maintain a good working relation with the scientific advisor and GDN;
- To seek advice and maintain an open and receptive attitude to the feedback and advice given by the scientific advisor and GDN.

The responsibilities of a grantee include:

- Holding regular communications (at least once a month, not always via GDN) with the scientific advisor to discuss their research progress and provide written updates (via email or reports) to the scientific advisor. GDN must be included in all grantee- scientific advisor communications;
- Preparing in advance for all scheduled meetings (virtual and face-to-face), and provide reading materials and updates in advance;
- Providing a formal response to the scientific advisor's feedback, even if certain suggestions are not feasible;
- Approaching the scientific advisor and GDN as soon as s/he encounters a challenge that hinders their research progress;
- Being sensitive to the time invested by the scientific advisor and GDN
- Having a genuine interest in their own professional growth.

4.3 GDN

GDN is expected to systematically involve scientific advisors during the course of its programs. GDN must ensure that the grantee-scientific advisor pairing is adequate, based on the research context, grantee's needs and relevant experience of the scientific advisor. GDN's relationship with the scientific advisor and the grantee is mandated by the grant agreement and enforced through its mediums of communications. GDN is also expected to ensure that the grantee-scientific advisor relationship is smooth and continuous. Additionally, through its various baseline and mid-term program evaluations, GDN is expected to ensure that the support provided meets the needs of the grantee during the course of the study.

Specifically, GDN is expected to perform the following role:

- To undertake a needs-assessment of the grantee in relation to the research study;
- Based on this assessment, identify the best suited scientific advisor and pair her/him with the grantee at the very onset of the research.

GDN's responsibilities include:

- To coordinate the relationship between the scientific advisor and the grantee, and act as a moderator between the scientific advisor and the grantee;
- To provide guidance on the overall research and mentoring process;
- To ensure that the scientific advisor and the grantee have a clear understanding of the intensity and time investment required for each program, the various expectations from the scientific advisor and the grantee;
- To ensure regular communications (through conference calls, Skype, email communications, and if possible face-to-face meetings during workshops and site visits) between the scientific advisor and the grantee;
- To ensure that the grantee provides a formal response to the scientific advisor's feedback, even if certain suggestions are not feasible;
- To ensure that the funds for the research and mentoring process are utilized in a relevant and feasible manner;
- Based on the suggestions received from the scientific advisor, grantee or the evaluation reports, to tailor the support provided and adjust the program goals as required.

CHAPTER 5: HOW DOES MENTORING WORK IN PRACTICE AT GDN?

5.1 How is a scientific advisor identified?

Under the GDN programs, a scientific advisor is engaged at the very onset of the research phase, when the research question and associated methodological approach are being defined. Even in cases of multidisciplinary research studies, GDN insists on a well-defined research question with a clear methodological approach as a prerequisite of research quality.

GDN identifies its scientific advisor as follows:

- As its thematic areas of focus are well-recognized, GDN engages a panel of experts for each area/theme from the beginning of the activity/project. These experts are involved in the overall conceptualization and design of the project. Once the grantees are selected, GDN mobilizes (some of) these experts as scientific advisor for the selected research studies. This ensures greater ownership and dedication for the GDN project as a whole;
- The project's/program's Steering or Scientific Committee (responsible for the overall direction of the project/program) makes recommendations for potential scientific advisors;
- A scientific advisor could also be selected in consultation with the grantee research team. This ensures that the grantees receive a scientific advisor whom they are familiar and comfortable with, who can guide them to fulfill specific gaps that they foresee during the course of their research study. The flip-side to this is that the grantees may not always know their needs and research gaps. In such cases, GDN 'vets' the scientific advisors to ensure that they meet the requirements of the GDN project as a whole, and the grantee research study in particular.

GDN is in the process of setting-up a database for scientific advisors and potential resource persons, which will be updated periodically. This database will further help GDN identify resource persons and advisors based on the needs of a grantee.

5.2 How is a scientific advisor paired with a grantee?

GDN recognizes that each grantee has unique needs. Matching grantee needs with a scientific advisor who is committed to capacity building *(key)* and who has the willingness and availability to work with the grantee is critical. There are many ways of pairing scientific advisor with grantees. Three such examples are given below:

- One-on-one mentoring: A scientific advisor is paired with a grantee (researcher or research team) after an assessment of the capacity needs and the study's research focus;

- Sector/Area specific mentoring: Based on the thematic/area/country/regional focus of the scientific advisor, s/he may provide guidance to all grantees focused and working in that area/region;
- Depending on the funding, nature and structure of the research project, a Lead Technical Adviser, in addition to the assigned team-specific scientific advisor, may be engaged to provide feedback to all research teams in the project.

GDN further tries to enhance the motivation for scientific advisors to be a part of its program, beyond their own ethical considerations and commitment to capacity building. This is done by matching the scientific advisors to projects/activities in a way to provide an opportunity for the scientific advisors to pursue their own intellectual and academic interests or publications.

5.3 How is the mentoring process organized at GDN?

To avoid conflict of interest, most often scientific advisors are not involved in the selection of the grant recipients, but paired with the successful ones immediately afterwards. Sometimes research proposals are still too ambitious, with too many objectives and research questions or with a proposed methodology that is vague or not appropriate. This needs correction at the start rather than mid-point. Therefore, based on the grantee's needs, GDN identifies a suitable scientific advisor who is paired with the grantee at the very onset of the research.

Communication between the scientific advisor and the grantee is mainly via electronic means (conference calls, Skype, email communications). GDN considers on-the-ground site visits to be very important to contextualize the project, and most importantly, to strengthen the relationship between the scientific advisor and the grantee. Depending on funding availability or other opportunities to piggy-back on scheduled travel, at least once in the course of the grant cycle the scientific advisor and the grantee meet face-to-face, outside of the workshops organized by GDN.

Scientific advisors provide guidance and detailed feedback to the grantees (detailed roles and responsibilities included above). Furthermore, all financial disbursements to the grantees and approvals of research outputs at GDN are done in coordination with the scientific advisors to ensure quality outputs.

5.4 How does GDN monitor the mentoring process?

At the very start, GDN indicates its expectations from the project/activity, the scientific advisor and the grantee. GDN also encourages the scientific advisors and grantees discuss their expectations at the beginning of the relationship. These are then laid down in the grant agreements, with clear timelines and milestones.

GDN acts as a moderator and closely monitors the communication between the scientific advisor and the grantees by being a part of all grantee-scientific advisor communications. Where funding permits, a GDN program staff member attends all site-visits. To ensure consistency in Scientific Advisors' inputs, GDN closely reviews the feedback shared with the grantees. GDN uses project management and knowledge sharing platforms as tools to enable real time communication and project tracking among the scientific advisors, the grantees and the GDN staff. Periodic reports, usually every quarter, are received from the grantees on progress and challenges encountered, including in the mentoring process if any.