

CALL FOR RESEARCH TEAMS

Building the Economics of Open Transaction Networks

Summary

The Global Development Network (GDN) invites research teams to submit proposals to generate rigorous empirical evidence on the economics of Open Transaction Networks (OTNs) in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs). This Call is part of the [Building the Economics of Open Transaction Networks](#) research programme, supported by the Gates Foundation, which aims to advance theoretical and empirical understanding of OTNs, strengthen research capacity in LMICs, and inform policy and practice.

We invite proposals that address one of two research themes: (i) Participation and Inclusion, which examines whether OTNs expand participation among previously underserved buyers and sellers, or (ii) Welfare and Wider Impacts, which assesses how OTNs affect earnings, prices, market access, and the broader conditions of businesses and markets.

While proposals examining any OTN implementations are welcome, preference will be given to studies focusing on OTNs implemented using the Beckn Protocol, especially in Brazil, India and Kenya.

Selected teams will participate in a collaborative research programme supported by GDN's Global Scientific Advisory Committee, composed of senior economists and OTN experts. The Committee will provide strategic and technical guidance throughout the research process.

Funding: USD 50,000 per project

Number of Awards: Six

Duration: October 2026 – April 2028

Eligibility: Research teams affiliated with universities, think tanks, policy research centres, non-profit organisations, and other research institutions based in LMICs, with a demonstrated track record of conducting empirical research in the country of OTN implementation.

Last day of Submission: 21 August 2026 (Anywhere on Earth)

Note: The information above is only a summary of the Call for Proposals. Applicants should read the complete Call document carefully for full details on the research themes, deliverables, eligibility criteria, funding, and submission instructions before applying.

GDN reserves the right to amend or extend this Call for Proposals at any time.

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1. Background

The Global Development Network (GDN) is a public international organisation that supports high-quality, policy-oriented, social science research in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMIC) to promote better lives. Founded in 1999, GDN is headquartered in New Delhi (India), with offices in Clermont-Ferrand (France) and Arlington (USA). Our work spans the Global South.

As part of its work on inclusive digital transformation, GDN is undertaking a research programme on Open Transaction Networks (OTNs). It represents a new form of digital infrastructure that enables transactions through open, interoperable protocols rather than proprietary platforms. By allowing multiple applications and service providers to interact within a shared network governed by common standards, OTNs have the potential to increase participation and create more contestable digital markets.

The programme seeks to develop both theoretical and empirical understanding of OTNs by combining three complementary streams:

- Developing a theoretical model of OTNs
- Building empirical evidence by conducting country-level research on OTN implementations in different countries.
- Strengthening research capacity through methodology training workshops and mentorship of research teams.

In Phase 1 of the programme, the GDN team has developed a theoretical model of platform competition with protocol compliance. The model traces how compliance choices, application layer fees, and the larger user base that protocol participation makes available to each application combine to shape participation, interoperability, pricing, and welfare outcomes. (Engagement with the model is not a precondition for the proposal, and teams will be introduced to the model during the methodology workshop).

Phase 2 of the programme focuses on the selection of research teams to undertake empirical studies in countries where the OTN has been implemented.

During Phase 3, from October 2026 to February 2028, the selected teams will conduct empirical research. This phase will begin with a methodology workshop in October/November 2026, providing an opportunity for the research teams to engage with one another, meet members of the programme's advisory committee, and interact with senior economists. The workshop will also introduce the theoretical model, discuss the empirical research agenda, and refine research designs.

Phase 4, taking place in March and April 2028, focuses on disseminating the research findings. Activities in this phase include the publication of research outputs and an international conference to share the findings with relevant stakeholders.

2. Objective of the Call

This Call for Proposals supports the empirical component of the GDN research programme on OTNs. Its objective is to generate rigorous, policy-relevant empirical evidence on how OTN implementations shape market participation, inclusion, and wider impacts in LMICs.

Specifically, the Call seeks to fund research on OTN implementations in India, Kenya, and Brazil.¹ Findings from the supported studies will contribute to the evidence base on the economics of OTNs and inform the development of the theoretical model.

Through this programme, research teams will also have opportunities to engage with GDN's Global Scientific Advisory Committee, comprising OTN experts and senior economists. Advisors will provide technical and strategic guidance throughout the research, offering feedback on research questions, study design, data collection, policy relevance of research and dissemination activities.

The programme also facilitates peer learning and collaboration through workshops and conferences that bring together researchers, advisors, and empirical experts from different countries and contexts. These interactions are intended to strengthen research capacity and facilitate research networks.

This call covers Phase 3 and Phase 4 of the program from October 2026 to April 2028.

3. Defining Open Transaction Networks

For the purposes of this Call, OTNs are defined as decentralised, interoperable networks that enable digital transactions across multiple applications and participants through shared protocols and standards. They represent a new form of digital market infrastructure, enabling multiple independent providers and competing applications to transact using common, protocol-based rules rather than through a single centralised platform.

Many of these OTNs are built on the [Beckn Protocol](#), which is currently the most widely adopted open protocol for transaction-level interoperability. As of May 2026, twelve live networks were operating on the Beckn Protocol.

This research focuses specifically on open networks (Beckn and non-Beckn implementation) that support transactions on-network, including product discovery and matching, price discovery, ordering, logistics, and payment.

¹ We are open to OTN implementations in other countries classified as Low and Middle Income by the World Bank. Please refer to Section 3 and 4 for more details.

4. Suggested OTN Implementations

This Call for Proposals gives preference to empirical research on five OTN implementations across three countries: Brazil, India, and Kenya. The selected implementations differ in sector, scale, and implementation maturity, creating opportunities to study how different forms of open network architecture shape markets.

Applicants are expected to focus on only one of the five implementations:

- [Belém Aberta, Brazil](#): A city-scale, multi-sector implementation operating under community and university governance. Sectoral focus includes education and employment, mobility, healthcare, commerce, energy, and others. However, the current version of the network is focused on Skilling and Employment.
- [Open Network for Digital Commerce \(ONDC\), India](#): A multi-sector digital commerce network spanning retail, logistics, mobility, financial services, and public transport. This is the most mature OTN with several years of transaction history and multiple identifiable episodes of network expansion.
- [Namma Yatri, India](#): A mobility-focused application notable for its driver-centric economic model, publicly available data resources, and staggered expansion across multiple cities.
- [Unified Energy Interface \(UEI\), India](#): A collaborative community-based digital infrastructure that applies open network principles to electric vehicle charging and energy transactions and represents one of the newest sector-specific implementations in the OTN ecosystem.
- [OpenAgriNet, Kenya](#): Focuses on agricultural markets and provides an opportunity to examine how open transaction networks affect participation, coordination, and market access through agripreneur-led intermediary models.

We remain open to other OTNs (including non-Beckn implementations) that align with the programme's definition of an OTN. If you would like to propose additional OTN implementation for consideration, please contact us at OTN@gdn.int by 10 August, 2026

5. Research Themes and Scope

We recognise that empirical research on OTN is still emerging, and that data availability and identification opportunities vary substantially across implementations. Accordingly, this Call combines competitive proposal selection with a *collaborative* process of refining research design. Selected teams will participate in a methodology workshop prior to the inception phase, providing the

teams an opportunity to refine research questions, strengthen research design, assess data feasibility, and enhance the rigour of the proposed empirical strategy.

Although the methodology workshop will support further refinement of research questions and design, proposals should demonstrate a strong understanding of the research theme for producing rigorous and policy-relevant research.

Funding decisions will be based on the quality of the submitted proposals. We are interested in proposals that specify a research question, a research design, and a reasonable data plan relevant to the study context and one of the themes below.

5.1 Research Themes

Proposals should engage with at least one of the following two themes, using an empirical approach that aligns with the chosen implementation, considering data availability and access considerations.

Theme 1: Participation and Inclusion

This theme focuses on the extent to which OTNs broaden participation in digital markets among buyers and sellers, particularly those who were previously underserved or excluded. Central questions relate to who joins the OTN, who actively participates, who remains excluded, and how the participant base evolves over time.

Some examples of questions that teams could consider investigating include:

1. Composition and growth of the participant base: How does the participant base change over time across geography and sectors? To what extent does the OTN attract buyers and sellers who were not previously served by other closed alternatives?
2. The decision to join at the margin: What leads previously unattached buyers and sellers, those for whom existing platforms were unaffordable, ill-suited, or out of reach, to join an open transaction network?
3. Participation responses to network events: What is the impact of identifiable network events such as new application entries, sector-specific category introduction, or geographic expansion, on participation outcomes?

Theme 2: Welfare and Wider Impacts

This theme focuses on how participation in the network translates into welfare and broader economic outcomes for individuals and businesses reached by the network. Central questions include how joining affects participants' earnings and economic conditions, the prices and access experienced by buyers and users, and the wider effects on businesses and markets. Because the eligible implementations span different sectors, teams should focus on the outcomes relevant to the chosen implementation.

Some examples of empirical questions under this theme include:

1. Welfare and business outcomes: How does participation in the network affect the earnings and economic conditions of participating sellers, drivers, or providers, and the prices and access experienced by buyers and users?
2. Wider impacts of OTN introduction: How does the network affect business entry, exit, and survival, or broaden access to markets and services for those it reaches?
3. Causal estimates of OTN effects: What is the causal impact of OTN adoption, expansion, or participation on these outcomes, exploiting variation from rollouts, app entries, sectoral expansions, or regulatory events where it is available?

Where application-layer fees, or comparisons of market structure and concentration with other platforms, are observable from public or participant-level sources, they provide useful evidence on these outcomes and are welcome within either theme.

5.2 Research Design and Data

The eligible OTN implementations vary considerably in their stage of development, scale, and availability of data. Proposals should classify the maturity of the selected implementation and explain why the proposed research design is appropriate to that stage.

- For implementations with multi-year transaction histories and identifiable events such as category launches, network expansions, or participant entry, proposals are encouraged to use these sources of variation for causal identification where feasible.
- For recent implementations, we are open to rigorous baseline construction on designs specified in advance around rollouts or expansions planned during this research, and on measurement that supports future evaluation.
- Mixed-method approaches, and other methods suited to the question, are equally welcome, including where survey evidence complements the quantitative analysis.

From a data perspective, our priority is to ensure that the measurement strategy is closely aligned with the research questions. Where possible, we encourage researchers to build on existing administrative and transaction data, operator-shared data, and publicly available information as these can support robust analysis.

Primary data collection is welcome when existing data sources are not sufficient to measure the outcomes of interest. For example, surveys might record when a participant joined and, for those who have not joined, the reasons for not joining, together with baseline characteristics and outcomes before and after joining, across sectors where feasible.

Proposals may also combine multiple data sources. For example, researchers might link transaction or administrative data with a targeted survey or combine individual-level data with area-level indicators across locations with varying levels of OTN penetration.

We encourage applicants to use the combination of data sources best suited for the research questions, while also ensuring that data collection efforts remain proportionate to the available funding.

5.3. Data Access and Feasibility

GDN recognises that securing access to relevant data may be a significant challenge for OTN research. The programme is therefore structured to help selected teams navigate data-access constraints through a methodology workshop, mentorship and technical guidance as part of the programme.

GDN will also work with teams to facilitate data conversations with relevant stakeholders such as network operators, businesses, and intermediaries. Where necessary, GDN can support data-sharing agreements.

Proposals should set out how the team will use this support alongside its own efforts to obtain the data for research. Applicants must:

- Clearly identify the data requirements
- Describe the proposed approach to obtaining access to those datasets
- Specify contingency plans if preferred data sources are not accessible
- Design research questions that can be credibly answered with accessible data.

This information should be summarised in the data-feasibility table provided in the submission guidelines.

6. Funding

Successful applicants will receive a grant of USD 50,000 to undertake the proposed research. The grant is intended to support all activities necessary for the completion of the project, including personnel costs, data collection, research assistance, and other direct and indirect expenses (including applicable taxes).

Travel and accommodation costs associated with workshops and conferences organised by GDN will be covered separately.

Applicants must submit a budget (using the GDN-provided template) outlining the planned allocation of the grant across project activities.

7. Deliverables

Selected teams will be expected to participate in the broader OTN Research Programme at GDN and deliver the following outputs throughout the course of the project:

1. An inception report with the final research design, data sources, and workplan.
2. Participation in two workshops and one conference organised by GDN.
3. Periodic progress updates as requested by GDN.
4. A draft working paper presenting the research findings.
5. A final research paper incorporating reviewer feedback.
6. Provide open access to research data, where feasible.

Submission of final research papers for publication in peer-reviewed journals are encouraged where aligned with teams' goals and capacity. While this is not a requirement, teams that opt to publish will receive additional funding to ensure it meets the open access requirements of this programme.

8. Open Access Policy

This funding opportunity is supported through a grant from the Gates Foundation. Successful applicants will be required to comply with the [Gates Foundation's Open Access Policy](#).

This includes making peer-reviewed publications arising from the funded research immediately available as open access and, where feasible, making the underlying research data publicly available. Where legal, ethical, privacy, or contractual restrictions apply, grantees will be expected to share appropriate documentation, non-confidential aggregated data where possible, and other materials necessary to support transparency and reproducibility. Detailed guidance on these requirements will be provided to successful applicants before the grant agreement is finalised.

9. Eligibility Requirements

Applications may be submitted by research teams affiliated with universities, think tanks, non-profit organisations, and other research-oriented institutions or consortia based in LMIC, as currently classified by the [World Bank](#). Applicants must demonstrate capacity to undertake empirical economic research. To ensure contextual knowledge and stakeholder engagement, applicants must have prior research experience in the country where the proposed OTN implementation is located.

Consortium applications are encouraged where they bring together complementary expertise such as empirical economics, sectoral knowledge and local implementation experience. In the case of consortium applications, one institution must be designated as the lead institution and assume overall responsibility for project management and grant administration.

The Principal Investigator should have experience in empirical industrial organisation, applied microeconomics, development economics, or closely related fields. Experience conducting research on digital platforms, digital economy, digital public infrastructure, or related sectors will be considered an asset.

Research teams should also demonstrate experience in data collection in the proposed country of study, including the ability to access and manage the data. Female-led or gender-balanced teams are strongly encouraged.

Note: Applicants from India must be eligible to receive foreign funding under the Government of India's Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010, as amended.

10. Evaluation Criteria

Eligible proposals will be evaluated based on the following criteria. Please refer to the proposal submission guidelines to ensure requested information is included in the application.

Criterion	Weight
Research questions and their relevance to the research theme	20%
Methodological rigour based on research design	20%
Data sources and feasibility of the data access plan	20%
Potential contribution to the policy and research dissemination plan	20%
Qualifications and capacity of the research team	20%

11. Application Timeline

The anticipated timeline for the Call is as follows:

Milestones	Date
Call for proposals published	10 July 2026
Proposal submission deadline	21 August 2026
Shortlisted applicants notified	18 September 2026
Discussions with shortlisted applicants	21- 25 September 2026
Selected applicants notified	30 September 2026
Grant agreement finalised	October 2026
Project commencement	October 2026

Interested applicants are encouraged to contact the OTN programme team with questions by 10 August 2026.

12. Proposal Guidelines

Applicants must structure their proposals according to the sections outlined below. Proposals must not exceed 8 pages, including references. Please submit proposals as a PDF in English, using Times New Roman, 12-point font, with 1-inch margins throughout.

I. OTN Implementation Site

Identify one eligible OTN implementation that will serve as the focus of the proposed research.

II. Research Question

Clearly state the research question(s) and state their alignment with one or both of the research themes. Applicants should explain the significance of the proposed research and why the selected question(s) are appropriate for the implementation context and stage of maturity.

III. Research Design

Describe the proposed empirical strategy and how it will address the research questions. If applicable, responses should justify the credibility of the proposed comparison or counterfactual and specify the strengths and limitations.

Where causal inference is feasible, authors should explain how the design supports causal claims. Where implementation conditions do not yet support causal designs, rigorous baseline assessments and well-developed prospective designs are equally welcome and will be evaluated on their methodological strength, transparency, and potential to support future research.

IV. Data Access

Describe the data required for the proposed analysis, anticipated data sources, proposed access arrangements, and any known data limitations.

Data Sources	Access Arrangements	Data limitations	Alternative data options

If applicants plan to collect primary data, they should clearly describe their data collection strategy. Proposals must demonstrate that the research can be completed within the grant period using data that are realistically obtainable. Applicants should also identify contingency plans, including alternative research approaches or data sources, to ensure the project can proceed if key datasets become unavailable.

Applicants must provide details of any regulatory or ethical approvals required to collect primary data in the country of research, including approvals at both national and sub-national levels, where applicable. They should indicate the relevant approving authorities and, where possible, the anticipated timeline for obtaining these approvals.

V. Policy Relevance:

Applicants should explain how the findings could inform policy or the future development of Open Transaction Networks. Please also outline a dissemination plan to share your project outputs in your country/among your networks.

VI. Research Team and Institutional Capacity:

Provide information on the role and responsibilities of each team member. Applicants should demonstrate that the team has the capacity to successfully implement the proposed research. You will be asked to submit CVs separately in the application form.

13. Application Submission Instructions

Applications must be submitted through the GDN application portal using this [link](#).

Applicants are required to submit the following documents:

- Research Proposal (prepared in accordance with the proposal guidelines)
- CVs of all team members
- Project budget (prepared using GDN template provided with the Call on the website)
- Letter of support (for consortium applicants)

In addition, applicants should be prepared to provide a 200–250 word summary of each section of the research proposal when completing the online application form.

14. Contact Information

If you have any questions or require clarification regarding this Call for Proposals, please contact the OTN Programme Team at OTN@gdn.int.

We aim to respond to all enquiries within 2–3 business days (excludes weekends and public holidays in India). To ensure you receive a response before the application deadline, please submit your questions in advance of the closing date.