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

Human Stories

HWÉFA CONSULTING

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Savoirs Sahel 2: Mauritanie Perspective

When Mauritanie Perspective joined the Savoirs Sahel programme, it was not starting from zero. The think tank had already carved out a distinct identity in Mauritania's public sphere: independent, plural, and unapologetically engaged with difficult questions. What it lacked was not vision or expertise, but the conditions to sustain momentum, scale its work, and project its voice beyond national borders.

Founded in 2010 to focus on governance, citizen participation, social inclusion, democracy, and sustainable development (in particular on youth, gender, education, social justice, social cohesion, and the fight against poverty), Mauritanie Perspective uses analyses, policy briefs, and situational notes to connect research with real public debate. Its model is deliberately hybrid, bringing together researchers and academics, senior civil servants, and private sector actors, while remaining unaffiliated with any political party or state institution.

However, Mauritanie Perspective defines itself first as, simply, a space. A space for dialogue between public decision-makers, civil society, researchers, and private sector actors. A space where complex development challenges such as governance, youth, education, social cohesion, gender, and poverty, can be discussed openly and without partisan affiliation or ideological constraints. Its model brings together academics, senior civil servants, and private-sector professionals, allowing different forms of knowledge and experience to intersect.

This positioning has always been intentional. Unlike think tanks, which are often tied to political parties or advocacy agendas, Mauritanie Perspective chose independence as a core principle. That choice earned it credibility, but it also came with constraints. Sustaining regular activities, maintaining visibility, and institutionalisation required resources that were difficult to secure in a context wherein funding opportunities remain scarce.

As it had already established its own agenda and priorities, what it sought was financial support that respected that agenda. Enter: GDN. The programme's flexibility, which was forthcoming about allowing think tanks to propose their own projects rather than conform to predefined themes, was the decisive factor to move forward with what Mauritanie Perspective described as a partnership, not a front-runner.

From the outset, the most visible change was pace. With the support of the programme, Mauritanie Perspective was able to sustain a regular rhythm of activities and publications. The internal capacity had always been there, however the programme made it possible to produce more frequently, to plan further ahead, and to maintain a consistent public presence. Analytical briefs, situational notes, and discussion forums multiplied, reinforcing the organisation's role as a reference point on issues of national interest.

The visibility they had likewise sought, naturally followed. Participation in the Knowledge Fair, an intellectual marketplace wherein think tanks present their work, observe others, and identify complementarities, proved particularly influential. Taking part twice,

Mauritanie Perspective expanded its professional network across the subregion and gained confidence in its comparative standing. It became easier to convene partners from several countries around shared initiatives. In other words, what had once required effort, had now became almost routine.

This networking also translated into more concrete outcomes. Mauritanie Perspective began working with other think tanks on joint proposals, including a consortium response to a regional call funded by an external organisation. A collaborative research project on digitalization and governance emerged as well. These collaborations continued independently of the programme itself, rooted in relationships first established through the programme's mechanisms.

Credibility deepened alongside visibility. Producing regular outputs with a recognised scientific label strengthened the organisation's standing with media, partners, and decision-makers. Mauritanie Perspective increasingly found itself solicited to contribute expertise to national dialogues, advise on methodology, or comment publicly on developments in the Sahel. Major media outlets sought its analysis, reinforcing its position as a trusted voice, rather than an occasional commentator on the fringes. But for Mauritanie Perspective, impact is not measured by a single policy change, or headline: it is cumulative. It is becoming a leader within the national think tank landscape, it is widening recognition into subregions. It is the ability to mobilise partners quickly when an opportunity arises. Finally, and ultimately, it is the capacity to contribute meaningfully to the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of public policies.

At the same time, the organisation remains clear-eyed about limits. The shorter duration of the programme, combined with constrained budgets, was not enough to resolve their deeper questions of institutional sustainability. Further, while the programme enabled acceleration, it could not guarantee long-term consolidation. A longer timeframe would have allowed institutional gains to take root more firmly. These reflections shape Mauritanie Perspective's recommendations for the future. More ambitious funding envelopes. Comparative, multi-country, projects that reflect the truly regional nature of Sahelian challenges. Stronger capitalisation of research outputs via shared platforms and open repositories. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, follow-on support for organisations that demonstrate strong performance, so that early gains are not lost once a project ends.

Looking back, the most significant contribution of the programme was not a single activity or output, but a shift in scale. Mauritanie Perspective did not become something entirely new, rather it became more fully itself. By being more visible and better connected, the staff became more confident in their ability to convene, to speak, and to be heard.

In a context where civil society actors often struggle to sustain their voice, that shift matters. It shows that investing in independent think tanks can strengthen public debate, enrich policy processes, and create durable spaces for dialogue in spaces that remain open long after a programme has formally ended.

Savoirs Sahel 2: LAEREAG

For the Laboratory for Studies and Research in Economics (LAEREAG), research has never been an end in itself. It is part of a longer chain, the links being analysis, dialogue, and action, through which economic evidence is meant to travel beyond reports and into real decisions.

Since its creation in 2012, the think tank has been housed within the Faculty of Economics and Management and has positioned itself as a bridge between evidence and action. Its work focuses on key development challenges, by producing applied research and convening public debates to test findings against lived realities. Over the years, its expertise has been increasingly recognised. Government ministries have sought its input on major policy processes, including the national industrialisation master plan and, most recently, the National Development Plan presented in Abu Dhabi.

Yet, despite this track record, sustaining influence required more than producing sound analysis. The question LAEREAG faced was how to ensure that research not only reached decision-makers, but translated into policies that were understood, debated, and ultimately implemented. They did not wish to continue circulating reports that would eventually fade from memory, but instead to remain present in national conversations. In doing this, they could better track implementation, and ask the difficult questions when progress stalled.

Like many action-oriented research institutions, LAEREAG operated in a context shaped by project-based funding. Resources were mobilised study by study, leaving little room to invest in long-term institutional systems. Once a project concluded, funding was exhausted, and attention shifted immediately to securing the next opportunity. This model made it difficult to plan beyond the short term, or to consistently strengthen internal capacities.

At the same time, the expectations placed on the organisation were growing. Public authorities increasingly sought evidence that was not only rigorous, but immediately usable. In addition, young researchers within the team were expected to engage confidently in public debates, interpret complex data, and translate findings for non-technical audiences, often without the training or exposure required to do so effectively.

Visibility posed another challenge. While LAEREAG's work was occasionally featured in media outlets, its engagement with the private sector, financial institutions, and civil society remained uneven. To play its role fully as a think tank, especially one capable of shaping decisions rather than only informing them, it became increasingly clear they needed stronger tools for advocacy and communication.

LAEREAG first encountered GDN through its open calls for proposals and applied with the intention of the programme providing a space for reflection, as much as action. Rather than imposing a new direction, the programme encouraged LAEREAG to interrogate its own practices. How were findings packaged? Who were they written for? At what point

did research become inaccessible to those outside academic or technical circles? These questions guided the design of activities and as such, capacity strengthening was treated as a practical exercise. The team began to learn how to translate complex evidence into formats that policymakers, civil society actors, and citizens could genuinely engage with.

This shift became particularly visible when they decided to focus on the creation of a monitoring unit for demographic dividend issues. While the country already had a dedicated National Observatory for the Demographic Dividend, they produced overly detailed technical reports that were difficult for non-specialists to interpret. LAEREAG's new unit took on the task of transforming that information by rewriting it in accessible language: producing policy briefs and bulletins, as well as organising public discussions to explain why decisions related to the demographic dividend mattered, and how they could be implemented.

This process also strengthened advocacy skills among younger researchers. They learned not only how to analyse data, but how to present it persuasively, engage diverse audiences, and navigate public debates. In the end, their awareness-raising activities reached civil society organisations, development partners, and financial institutions, and most notably, public officials. As a result, LAEREAG was able to gain access to the Ministry of Higher Education, where they advocated for the adoption of measures to better promote women's access to higher education: recognising the link between women's education, employment, and the demographic dividend.

However, other ambitions remained works in progress, given the limitations of geographic reach. With 23 provinces stretching across a vast territory, resources were insufficient to conduct wider sensitisation activities, particularly in rural and decentralised areas.

Looking back, the most significant change was not output, but a shift in posture. Research became more outward-facing, more accessible, and more deliberately tied to implementation. Capacity strengthening was not an abstract concept, but a means of ensuring that evidence could travel across institutions, across audiences, and into decisions that affect people's lives.

For LAEREAG, that is where the value of the programme endures: not as a completed project, but as a strengthened ability to turn knowledge into action, and action into lasting impact.

IRCB Volet 1: Cheick Anta Diop University

For Ibrahima Diouf, coordinator of the Human Geography Laboratory at Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar, the IRCB programme offered an opportunity to rebuild a research laboratory that had long struggled to function.

The laboratory had existed since the late 1970s, yet for long periods it operated only intermittently. Activities began to pick up again around 2015 or 2016, but the foundations needed to sustain a research community were still fragile. The laboratory had no internal regulations, no clearly defined research focus, and no independent funding. Research activities depended largely on occasional support from the doctoral school or the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, which made it difficult to plan collective work or establish long term priorities.

Despite these constraints, researchers continued to support one another. Senior academics supervised doctoral students, and small research initiatives were organized whenever possible. Young researchers presented progress on their theses, and occasional training sessions took place. These efforts kept the laboratory active, but they were mostly driven by individual champions. There was commitment and motivation from select individuals, yet no structure bringing those efforts together.

The GDN grant created an opportunity to change that dynamic. With resources to organize activities and plan collectively, the laboratory began to rebuild itself as a functioning research unit. Meetings, training sessions, and collaborative activities allowed researchers to work together more regularly. What had once been scattered efforts slowly began to take the shape of a coordinated team.

One of the first steps was to clarify the laboratory's research agenda. Through internal discussions, three research axes were defined. Each axis is now led by senior researchers, with doctoral students and early career scholars participating in the work. Members of the laboratory now know how their research fits into a broader framework, and how their work connects to the work of others. This shift helped create a sense of coherence that had been missing before.

The IRCB programme also helped to strengthen the laboratory's visibility. Previously, it had no website and little public presence. Today the laboratory has both a website and a visual identity, which allows its activities to be shared more easily within the university and beyond. Activities supported by the grant also expanded the laboratory's networks. International conferences brought together researchers from across Africa and Europe, allowing young scholars to present their work and exchange ideas with colleagues from other institutions. These events also helped build partnerships beyond the university, as new collaborations emerged with other research laboratories in Senegal, as well as with NGOs and civil society organizations working on related themes.

The IRCB programme unfolded in a challenging context. Political tensions during the early phase of implementation slowed certain activities, and occasional delays in disbursement required adjustments to the timeline. Even so, most of the planned activities were

implemented. Conferences were organized, training sessions delivered, and partnerships strengthened. Yet, when Diouf reflects on the experience, he does not point to a single activity or output as the most important result. Instead, he speaks about the change in how the laboratory fundamentally works. Researchers who once operated largely independently now collaborate within defined teams. Young researchers are integrated into thematic groups, and discussions about the laboratory's future are collective, rather than fragmented.

What began as a grant to support research activities gradually became something deeper: a process of rebuilding the laboratory as a community. The most significant outcome, in Diouf's view, is this very shared sense of direction that emerged from that process. The laboratory now has a strategic plan, defined priorities, and a team that sees itself as working toward the same objectives. As he reflected at the end of the conversation, the most important change was the ability to bring people together around a common vision. Once that foundation exists, he believes, progress can continue well beyond the life of the programme.

"The ability to build a cohesive team with a shared vision," he said, "is what will sustain progress."

IRCB Volet 1: Mentor for Alioune Diop University

When Florent Bresson came across the call to serve as a mentor under the Global Development Network's institutional capacity strengthening programme, the appeal was immediate. What drew him in, though, was not the prospect of leading a project, but the possibility of contributing to something designed to last beyond a single funding cycle. Based at Université Clermont Auvergne and involved in international development initiatives through the Clermont development hub, he saw the role less as one of direction and more as accompaniment along a journey.

The project he was paired with came from the Université Alioune Diop in Bambey, Senegal. It brought together economists, jurists, and management scholars who shared a common ambition: to move beyond working as separate research teams and formally establish a multidisciplinary laboratory with a clear identity and institutional recognition. At the time, no such laboratory existed. Research was being carried out in parallel silos, limiting visibility and leaving few structural levers to access wider funding or develop external partnerships.

From the outset, the foundations were solid. The project was well conceived, the team highly competent, and leadership clearly defined. What the team needed was not guidance on scientific content, but an external perspective on how their work could be positioned institutionally. "My role," he explains, "was not to intervene at the heart of the scientific project, but to help them think about how that project could live institutionally." The mentoring relationship unfolded over two years. It began with an intensive phase: weekly meetings over several weeks, long email exchanges, and detailed discussions to refine the project's structure and sequencing. This early period allowed space to revisit elements that had been prepared quickly in response to the call for proposals. As the project progressed, the rhythm became lighter and more adaptive, shifting to online meetings every couple of months and supplemented by calls or messages when faster decisions were needed.

Over time, one dimension of the mentor's role became particularly clear: the need to translate between different institutional logics. Expectations embedded in an international capacity-building programme do not always align neatly with the realities of national university systems, legal frameworks, or incentive structures. Like the GDN programme itself, his contribution was not to impose external standards. Instead, it was to help the team think through how international requirements could be adapted realistically to their own institutional environments, without undermining their ownership or research feasibility. Alongside this, he notes that equally important to his guidance was his restraint. Rather than accelerating decisions or resolving tensions on the team's behalf, he deliberately left space for internal negotiation and learning. This posture mattered in a context where sustainability depends on collective ownership, rather than external validation. In this sense, the aim was not to optimize the project at all costs, but to ensure that decisions, once made, would endure long beyond the programme.

One of the clearest markers of this progress came early: the laboratory was formally created and institutionally recognised. That milestone alone represented a significant shift. Where research had once been organised around individual teams, there was now a collective structure with a shared identity, capable of hosting doctoral training, coordinating projects, and engaging with partners. “The real test,” he notes, “will be whether the laboratory is still active in the years to come.” Still, the creation itself mattered. It made visibility, funding eligibility, and long-term planning tangible.

That visibility grew quickly and led to new collaborations. In 2024, members of the laboratory were approached by the NGO Natural Justice, to conduct research on energy transition and sustainable development in Senegal. To mark its launch, the laboratory organised scientific days and a public roundtable that drew senior policymakers, including former ministers and at least one serving official. Shortly afterwards, members of the laboratory secured national research funding through the FIRST programme, an achievement that would not have been possible without the formal structure of a recognised laboratory. The funding, he recalls, was directly linked to the laboratory’s collective thematic focus on territorial development.

Not all changes, however, were immediate. Strengthening research quality through training, particularly for doctoral students, was part of the project: but its effects were expected to unfold over time. The same was true for interdisciplinary practice. Bringing together economists, jurists, and management scholars required sustained exchange and patience. “That kind of collaboration doesn’t happen overnight,” he says. “It emerges gradually, through repeated interaction.” Administrative transformation proved slower still. University governance systems were rigid, and recognition of laboratories within decision-making bodies remained uneven. While efforts to advocate for change were underway, these were structural issues extending well beyond the project’s scope. The laboratory also struggled to secure permanent administrative support. When a faculty secretary who had partially filled that role moved on, tasks were redistributed to doctoral researchers, a pragmatic short-term solution, but not a sustainable one.

Beyond funding and governance, time itself emerged as a constraint. Building collective research practices, particularly across disciplines, requires sustained interaction and trust. While the programme created important momentum, many of the most ambitious shifts (deeper interdisciplinarity, higher-impact publications, and institutional reform) must necessarily extend beyond a single project cycle. From the mentor’s perspective, this reinforced the idea that capacity building is cumulative rather than linear, and that success should be assessed not only through immediate outputs, but through the conditions created for continued evolution.

At the individual level, however, capacity gains were already visible. Training on responding to calls for proposals paid off quickly, as evidenced by the laboratory’s success in securing funding. Confidence grew alongside competence. “Confidence builds on success,” he reflects. As achievements accumulated, cohesion within the laboratory strengthened, reinforcing leadership and collective ownership.

Throughout the process, he remained attentive to his posture as a mentor. “Mentorship is first and foremost a human relationship,” he explains. It requires listening, humility, and an acceptance that local teams understand their context better than any external expert. His role was not to take over, but to ask questions, flag risks, and offer perspective, while leaving final decisions with project leaders themselves. That balance, he believes, was critical. The project was never imposed from outside; it emerged from within the institution. Flexibility from GDN, including the decision to extend the project timeline when bureaucratic delays threatened implementation, allowed for this.

The experience also highlighted a distinction between project-level success and systemic change. While the programme supported the creation and consolidation of a laboratory, broader institutional reforms such as governance, funding allocation mechanisms, and administrative autonomy, remain dependent on long-term political processes. In this sense, the programme functioned less as a solution to structural constraints and more as a catalyst, demonstrating what becomes possible when institutions are given space, resources, and legitimacy to organise collectively.

Looking back, the most significant change he observed was not a single output, but a shift in mindset. Research was no longer framed primarily around individual scholars or isolated teams. Instead, it became something collective: shared resources, shared visibility, shared ambition. “The laboratory,” he says, “became the unit of reference.”

For him, that is where the programme’s lasting value lies. Mentorship, when done well, does not steer the project. It creates the conditions for institutions to recognise their own capacity and to organise themselves in ways that allow that capacity to endure.

IRCB Volet 2: Finding Structure, Finding Community

On an ordinary workday at the National Institute of Cartography, Hyacinthe Atangana Bamela reread a paragraph he had just revised after feedback from his mentor. The words felt sharper, the reasoning tighter, the tone more assured. He turned to a colleague sitting nearby and said, almost surprised by his own reaction, "I have the impression it wasn't me who wrote this paragraph." When the colleague asked why, he answered without hesitation, "It's so well written that I doubt myself." Looking back, he describes that moment with three words: pride, momentum, and clarity. Not because the paragraph was perfect, but because it marked a shift in how he was learning to think, argue, and step into his role as a researcher.

For six years, he has worked on transport systems, mobility patterns, and territorial governance across urban and rural contexts. What keeps him in the work is its practical value: for him, research is a way of turning complex problems into usable knowledge that can inform policy. Yet, like many early-career researchers, he reached a point where the main obstacles were no longer intellectual, but structural. After earning his doctorate in 2020, he focused on refining his methods, building visibility, and trying to establish himself as an independent researcher. That ambition, however, was constrained by limited postdoctoral funding. This caused data collection opportunities to remain scarce, as he knew that logistics and fieldwork costs could quickly stall even a well-designed project.

Beyond funding, he describes the post-PhD period as one where researchers are often left without a wider support system. "At some point, you find yourself alone and you have to fend for yourself." In Cameroon, he notes, researchers even have a phrase for it: *scientific resourcefulness*. It is a way of naming what it means to keep producing work under pressure, specifically with limited tools, limited funding, and limited guidance.

He heard about GDN while scrolling through his LinkedIn feed, after seeing a call shared by a French researcher he was connected with. His first impression was immediately positive, largely because the programme focused on capacity strengthening rather than only project financing, which was what he had been used to. What ultimately convinced him, however, was the programme's threefold support: methodological guidance, financial backing, and professional development. Of these, the mentoring component mattered most. At that stage of his career, he was, as he puts it, at a turning point: beginning to establish himself and looking for a stronger foundation to build on, but unsure how to do it. Just as importantly, the programme did not impose a theme. It allowed him to work on questions already central to his research trajectory, while strengthening how he framed them, defended them, and explained why they mattered.

Once the programme began, the rhythm was demanding but structured. A typical week moved between methodological workshops, individual follow-up sessions, and sustained writing time. This was all alongside detailed critiques from mentors, with the mentoring relationship itself shifting depending on the phase of the work: at times it was weekly,

while during fieldwork, it could become almost daily. His mentor was also a geographer, but with a different specialisation, and this difference became an advantage. It pushed him to step back from familiar assumptions and test new angles of analysis. “It allowed me to look at things differently,” he explains, helping him adopt approaches he had not previously had the opportunity to fully master.

The grant also changed what was possible in the field. The project itself was already prepared, but funding constraints had blocked progress. With support in place, data collection expanded significantly. A plan of fewer than ten days became closer to twenty days of fieldwork, deliberately widening the scope so he could examine aspects he might otherwise have glossed over. The result was not only richer data, but greater confidence in the depth and credibility of the work.

That change soon became visible in outputs and recognition. One article was published in July, and a second was in press. He describes improved academic credibility and increased regional collaboration, including ongoing exchanges with peers across Francophone Africa and early plans for joint publications. Professionally, he was promoted to research fellow, joined new networks and committees, and began representing his institution in regional planning processes. His management even asked him to prepare a policy brief to engage administrations that could use his findings, marking a shift from research as an internal academic product, to research positioned for real-world uptake.

The effects did not remain confined to his own work, though. He describes a broader shift in his professional environment, particularly in how methods and standards began to circulate among colleagues and the junior researchers he supervises. Over time, a small community formed around urban transport and mobility: an area where he had once felt largely alone. “In urban transport, I was the only one interested in these questions. Now, we are almost ten!” He also remains in contact with other fellows, sharing a clear intention that collaboration should continue beyond the formal end of the programme, ideally through a more structured network.

However, the experience was not without pressure. Administrative delays disrupted schedules, with funds arriving two to four weeks late. This forced rapid adjustments, under difficult seasonal conditions, including conducting fieldwork during the rainy season instead of the dry season. With hindsight, however, his most pointed lesson is not about the fellowship year itself, but about what comes after it. During implementation, exchanges among fellows emerged naturally through regional workshops, informal conversations, and early discussions around joint publications. But he is clear that this momentum is fragile once the formal structure ends. Researchers often return to the same conditions that shaped their early careers: heavy workloads, limited resources, and the pressure to manage alone.

He points to this gap between what fellows want to sustain and what they can realistically maintain without support as an entry point for GDN moving forward. In his view, the programme could help formalise what fellows are already trying to do informally: building networks across countries, creating mechanisms for continued exchange, and supporting

collaboration beyond the life of the grant project. This would not be a new programme, but an extra layer on top of something already so solid. In doing so, the fellowship would not be a closed chapter, but could becomes the beginning of a sustainable research community.

In this spirit, when asked to identify the most significant change brought by the programme, Atangana Bamela does not point to funding, outputs, or even self-promotion. Instead, he returns to the fundamental shift from the individual, to the collective. Where he once felt isolated, he now enjoys collaboration and the feeling of being increasingly visible beyond his border. Instead of managing alone, his work now progresses through dialogue and collective ambition. It is this, he argues, that gives the programme its lasting value.

Collaborative research that is recognised across institutions and countries, strengthens not only individual credibility, but allows knowledge to circulate, improve, and endure. For him, a change in how research is practised, and with whom, matters more than any single publication or grant cycle. It is the foundation on which a more connected and resilient research community can continue to grow.

IRCB Volet 2: Building Research That Travels

Sondou Tchakouni has always believed that research should travel: through publications, beyond borders, and across disciplines. For him, the challenge was never a lack of ideas. It was how to produce research that could circulate ethically, visibly, and on equal footing with work produced elsewhere.

Working on air quality management, urban planning, public participation, and biodiversity in West African cities, he was keenly aware that relevance alone does not always guarantee reach. Without access to existing scholarship and opportunities to engage with peers beyond his immediate environment, even the most pressing and prevalent urban questions risk remaining stuck at the local level.

Based at CERVIDA, the Regional Research Centre in Africa at the University of Lomé, Sondou defended his PhD in 2021 with a clear research agenda: improving secondary cities in West Africa. In his experience, research and policy debates frequently focused on capital cities, or rural development, with very little consideration for the areas between the two. Sondou was convinced that these cities deserved the same analytical seriousness and legislative attention. Unfortunately, the conditions to pursue that ambition were limited. Institutional support covered only the essentials, short field visits, some data collection, and basic logistics. Beyond that, the scaffolding required for high-quality research quickly disappeared and opportunities to travel, attend conferences, or exchange ideas with other researchers were rare.

What he needed was not simply funding to continue collecting data, but the space and guidance to rethink how his research was designed, analysed, and communicated, so that it could move beyond its local context. At that stage, he did not see himself at a dramatic crossroads. Rather, he describes the moment as one of strengthening foundations before moving further. Fast forward to a quick scroll on LinkedIn, where he discovered the Global Development Network. He took time to understand what GDN was and what the programme offered, noting quickly that it was not framed as funding alone. The emphasis on mentoring, professional guidance, and exchange stood out.

Once the fellowship began, the pace was steady and demanding. The work unfolded through a structured rhythm of writing, and regular feedback. For Sondou, the most transformative element was mentorship. “Methodology is the backbone of research,” he says. His mentor worked closely with him to strengthen the coherence between his research questions, tools, and data. It was never about imposing a fixed framework, but about learning how to make deliberate methodological choices. Alongside this, the wider programme structure mattered. GDN staff were consistently available, clarifying expectations and offering guidance at each stage. Interim research sessions and collective presentations created spaces to test ideas publicly and receive feedback from senior academics, pushing fellows to situate their work within broader debates.

Fieldwork brought forward the first set of challenges. Securing authorisations proved slower than anticipated, threatening his research timeline. Rather than cutting corners,

Sondou was determined to proceed officially. “We received an official grant,” he notes. “It was important that the work itself remained official and transparent.” With advice from his mentor and programme coordinators, he relied on professional networks to obtain the necessary permissions while maintaining the integrity of the process. The experience reinforced a principle that would stay with him: credibility is built as much through how research is conducted, as through what it produces.

One of the programme’s most tangible contributions was academic mobility. Through a mobility grant, Sondou travelled to Senegal, Burkina Faso, Tunisia, and France. These exchanges reshaped how he viewed his work. Conversations with researchers in different contexts challenged his assumptions and sharpened his analysis. What had once felt like an isolated case study, became part of a shared set of urban questions across regions. Some of these exchanges have since developed into discussions around joint publications, particularly with colleagues in Senegal.

The effects extended beyond his own research outputs. Upon returning to Lomé, Sondou was invited to share his experience with students and colleagues, leading sessions on research design, funding opportunities, and scientific communication. Training received during the fellowship, including exposure to artificial intelligence, opened unexpected professional doors. He was later recruited by a technology consulting firm, an opportunity he directly links to the skills and confidence developed through the programme. What distinguished GDN for him was its continuity. Support did not end with funds being disbursed: progress was monitored, mentorship remained active, and guidance was sustained throughout the entire research process. “In many programmes, you receive funding and work alone,” he explains. “Here, you are accompanied.”

Looking back, Sondou does not describe the experience as a sudden transformation, but as a recalibration. His work became more rigorous, more structured, and more outward-facing. Research that once felt bounded by local constraints began to circulate through dialogue, collaboration, and teaching. Today, he is more intentional about why he applies for opportunities. “You don’t apply just for money,” he says. “You apply because you want to improve something.”

That conviction now carries a responsibility. Sondou sees himself not only as a researcher, but as someone who can help others navigate similar challenges by sharing his own methods, offering feedback, and encouraging younger scholars to think beyond their individual projects. In that sense, the programme’s impact continues not as a closed chapter, but as a practice that travels from one researcher to another, from one city to the next.

DRA - ROCARE

When the work began in Mali, there was no shortage of social science research. What was missing was something more fundamental: a clear picture of how the system itself functioned. Who produced knowledge, how research cycles operated, where funding flowed (and where it did not), were questions that had rarely been examined. For ROCARE, participating in the programme was less about measuring performance than about revealing a system that had long operated without being fully seen.

Prior to the programme, social science research in Mali existed in fragments. Research was being conducted, but the system that supported it was poorly understood and largely neglected. Data was difficult to access, funding was limited, and social sciences received far less attention than applied fields such as agriculture or medicine. As a result, research cycles remained opaque. The contribution of social sciences to innovation, development, and public decision-making was rarely articulated in a way that could guide national policy.

Representing ROCARE, and drawing upon decades of experience within Mali's research institutions, the coordinator played a central role in implementing the evaluation. A multidisciplinary team was assembled, combining qualitative and quantitative expertise, and tasked with producing an institutional analysis of the social science research system. From data collection to validation, the process demanded methodological rigor, coordination across institutions, and sustained engagement with national stakeholders.

The assessment responded directly to the needs of Mali's research system. It identified structural gaps, clarified mismatches between priorities and funding, and made visible the chronic underinvestment in social science research. In particular, it highlighted how limited evaluation mechanisms had constrained resource allocation. The findings resonated. During the dissemination workshop, interest was palpable. For many participants, this was the first time social sciences had been examined with the same seriousness and depth applied to other research fields. The Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research publicly committed to using the results to inform national research policy: a signal that the evaluation had succeeded in opening a long-overdue conversation.

The programme's added value was in its holistic approach. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods, the assessment captured not only outputs and infrastructure, but also processes, coordination, and opportunities for leveraging research results. For donors and decision-makers alike, the data provide a basis for strategic planning, accountability, and funding decisions. For researchers, the assessment offers a framework to argue for the relevance of their work and for more equitable allocation of resources.

For the team in Mali, evaluation carries responsibility. Once gaps are identified, they must be addressed. Without this follow-up, the hard work of reaching a diagnosis risks becoming extractive (a concern the coordinator expresses plainly). Looking ahead, he

argues for deeper institutional anchoring: involving regional bodies, strengthening theories of change, adapting indicators more closely to national realities, and establishing mechanisms to monitor the implementation of recommendations. He also emphasizes continuity by training researchers in programme methodology, by reusing experienced national teams in future evaluations.

What the programme ultimately achieved was not simply reform itself, but something just as necessary: a shared map. For the first time, social science research could be discussed in systemic terms. The programme uncovered its strengths, its weaknesses, and its potential contribution to society. Whether that map leads to change, now depends on what actors choose to do with it.

DRA - ACED

For the African Centre for Development Studies (ACED), the most uncomfortable question did not come at the beginning of the process. Instead, it emerged near the end. Once the data was collected, the gaps were mapped, and the recommendations were articulated, a deeper concern surfaced: what happens if the story stops here?

Leading the national coordination of the programme was never meant to be a purely diagnostic exercise. From the outset, the ambition went beyond producing a report. It was about confronting how social sciences are perceived, valued, and resourced, and most importantly, whether a national research system would be willing to act on what it learned.

Before the DRH, social science research in Benin was active, but insufficiently recognized. Researchers were producing work, institutions were functioning, and expertise was clearly present, yet the social sciences occupied an uncertain position within the broader research and innovation ecosystem. Their contribution was often misunderstood or minimized, and in some cases treated as an auxiliary skill that could be absorbed informally by specialists from other fields.

For ACED, this was more than a question of visibility. When social sciences are undervalued, methodological rigor suffers, and the case for sustained investment in training, institutions, and long-term knowledge production becomes harder to defend. What the system lacked was not activity, but a shared understanding of why social science research matters, along with the institutional commitment to treat it accordingly.

From the outset, relevant national authorities were engaged in the process as key stakeholders, particularly those responsible for overseeing research and innovation, including the Directorate General for Scientific and Technical Research and the Benin Agency for Research and Innovation (ABRI). While they were not implementing the study, their participation in consultations and validation activities positioned them as important actors in interpreting and potentially acting on the findings. Thus, when the study began, ACED mobilized resource persons, recruited enumerators, ensured scientific quality, and built bridges between institutions that managed or depended on research and innovation. These included universities, research centres, and national bodies responsible for scientific and technical research, all of whom were both subjects of the assessment and potential users of its results.

For ACED, expectations were clear. First, to revisit and challenge how stakeholders perceive social sciences. Second, to lay the groundwork for a fairer appreciation of the diversity of social science disciplines. Finally, and only if those two shifts occurred, to create conditions where national institutions would allocate resources more meaningfully across training, research, and institutional development.

The programme challenged the country to pause and examine the structural gaps in how actors are organized, how research is conducted, and how results are used. More importantly, it articulated in concrete terms what adjustments were required. The final

validation workshop marked a significant moment. Representatives from ABRI, including board members and its president, attended alongside other national stakeholders and openly acknowledged that corrective steps were already being considered. In that sense, the programme succeeded in clearing a path. It provided a diagnosis that was difficult to dismiss and useful for immediate reflection.

Some uptake began to emerge. Universities and research centres alike showed interest in improving mentorship and methodological quality, even as they remained constrained by limited human resources. Engagement from national authorities during the process also signalled a willingness, at least at the level of dialogue, to reconsider how social sciences are positioned and used within the national system.

Still, the impact was uneven. Without a structured mechanism to carry the findings forward at the national level, use of the data risked fragmentation. The potential for cross-learning among francophone countries that participated in the programme was equally underexplored, despite the fact that this cohort represented a rare opportunity for shared reflection and collective progress.

For ACED's coordinator, one point remains non-negotiable. Looking ahead, he argues for continuity: platforms for cross-country exchange, follow-up milestones, and space for national teams to deepen analysis on their own terms once the shared framework is established. The DRH, he insists, should be the first step of a longer trajectory, not an endpoint. Its real value lies not in what it revealed, but in whether systems choose to change because of it.

"Had I believed this would be an extractive exercise, a report produced and then abandoned, I would not have participated," he reflects. In his view, once an assessment of this kind is undertaken, there is a moral obligation to act on it.