

Call for interested parties – A comparative perspective of funding instruments for building research capacity

Despite a downwards trend, for many funders in international development supporting research capacity strengthening in the global South remains a distinct and important strategy within broader efforts to advance sustainable development globally. However, donor organizations operate based on different assumptions about what and where research capacity is, what it is for, and how it can be strengthened effectively. Donor preferences can further emerge from path dependency, organizational history, or a deliberate effort to improve on past efforts, in response to evaluations of efficiency and impact. This explains the variety of funding instruments that typically populate research capacity support in international development.

One of the key lessons from the global pandemic is that research capacity is indispensable for dealing with societal shocks and strengthening societal resilience. This is true for vaccine research as well as for research informing responses to the deep socio-economic impacts of the pandemic across the planet. Funding is the backbone of any robust, responsive R&D system, and funding instruments create and obscure opportunities and new developments. While the outcome of funding is routinely evaluated, it is less often that the efficacy/fitness for purpose of funding *instruments*. It is even rarer to find comparative evaluations of funding instruments in international development.

Research has shown that funding instrument design can be consequential for programs that pursue different objectives: some instruments aim to build research capacity to work on specific issues; others aim to grow a critical mass of professionals with an advanced research training; and still others focus on increasing the footprint of Southern voices in global frontline research. Instruments also target different levels of research capacity, with a growing interest in influencing systemic transformations while also supporting capacity at the individual and institutional level.

The shrinking space for international support to Southern research makes the task of unpacking, understanding and assessing funding instruments in all their nuances more urgent than ever. GDN, in collaboration with the UNESCO Chair in Research Management and Innovation Systems at Lund University, is issuing an open call to donors and researchers working in the global South on the topic of research ecosystems/research funding/research capacity, to join a working group that will co-design an ambitious comparative research agenda on the design of donor instruments and their impact, with specific attention to the social sciences and humanities. The objectives of the initiative at this stage are:

- (i) To develop a map of funding instruments that focus on research capacity building
- (ii) To analyze comparatively funding instrument design with their purpose

- (iii) To discuss funding instrument design in light of donor institutional strategies and capacity strengthening visions

At this stage, this is an exploratory exercise and it is not funded. Through a multi-step convening, networking and co-creation exercise, the expectations is that GDN and the UNESCO Chair will facilitate the emergence of multi-country projects as collaborations between qualified Southern researchers and interested research donors.

Interested researchers are requested to contact GDN via email at doingresearch@gdn.int with a brief overview of their interest and experience in the topic, by September 30th. A limited number of invitations to an inception workshop (currently being planned for the late fall of 2021) will be shared, along with details of participants, in late October 2021.

Essential resources

- The webpages of the [“Doing Research” global initiative](#) on the website of the Global Development Network
- A paper by Merle Jacobs (holder of the UNESCO Chair in Research Management and Innovation Systems at Lund University) and Leila Jabrane on funding instruments: [Being there in the flex: humanities and social science collaborations with non-academic actors](#)