

Rethinking Knowledge Networks:

The Need for a New Approach

Egypt Network for Integrated Development

Case Study 018

Rethinking Knowledge Networks - The need for a new approach¹

Introduction

Researchers in developing and transition countries (often referred to as “the South”) have valuable information to contribute to decisions being made about development in their countries and elsewhere. But they face challenges being heard by government staff and other people involved in policy making. They may lack confidence and ability to communicate their research effectively, lack adequate resources and capacity to disseminate, lack access to academic journals they need in order for their research to be published, or face closed institutional cultures. The gap is acknowledged and is typically addressed through research capacity building programs to ensure that developing country policy is based on good local evidence.

Yet, while research capacity building is a long term solution and the research lifecycle is lengthy, the timeframe for change and demand for ideas is rapid. New technologies and increased access to the internet by thinkers in developing countries have opened the door to shorter term approaches that can run in parallel to capacity building programs.

Valuable practical lessons can be learnt from a number of global and regional knowledge programs that demonstrate that local and regional development challenges are met by home-grown solutions promoted through efficient mediators of knowledge to policy. These mediators play a fundamental catalytic role. A good example of which is **GDNet**, which has played a key catalytic role during its lifetime and left behind a number of lessons-learning publications (see box 1), sharing reflections on achievements and outcomes and shedding light on the importance of how to become better capacity builders, making connections and learning by design.

GDNet publications:

(Box 1)

GDNet’s reflections on the achievements, outcomes and learning of the GDNet programme, 2010 to 2014, are captured in the [GDNet Legacy Document](#).

GDNet’s June 2014 series of short ‘Lessons Learned’ publications comprise: [Listening to the South: What GDNet has learned about Southern researchers, their challenges and their needs’](#)

[‘Becoming better capacity builders: What GDNet has learned about developing researchers’ confidence and ability to communicate their research’](#)

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[‘Making Connections: What GDNNet has learned about using social media to raise the profile of Southern research’](#)

[‘Learning by Design: Perspectives on Monitoring and Evaluating a Southern-Focused Knowledge Service’](#)

GDNNet’s other learning publications, toolkits and project documents (e.g. How To Guides on Policy Influence) are available from [DFID’s Research for Development portal](#).

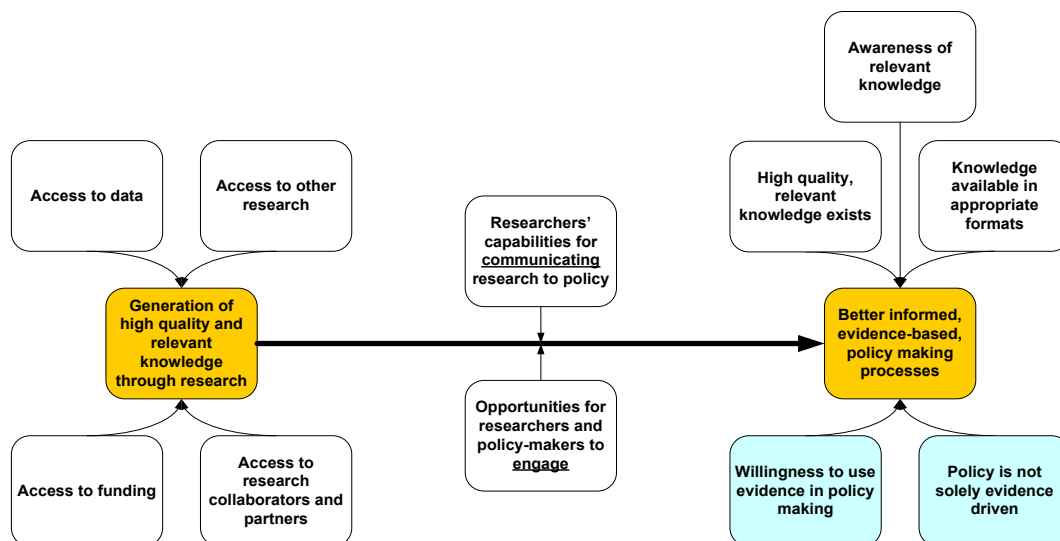
This document focuses on key lessons learnt that can be of relevance to ENID, and takes into account current local contextual challenges and recommends a new ‘think net approach’ to ENID to effectively address an innovative knowledge to policy approach.

1. Knowledge to Policy – The GDNNet Experience

The **GDNNet** program was the **Global Development Network’s (GDN)** knowledge service which supported Southern researchers to contribute and debate ideas in development for over a decade. It was setup in 1999 to provide global networking opportunities, financing for researchers in Southern countries to strengthen their research communication and policy outreach, and an online repository through which they could share their work. The GDNNet program formally closed in June, 2014.

Adopting a Strategic Approach - Theory of Change

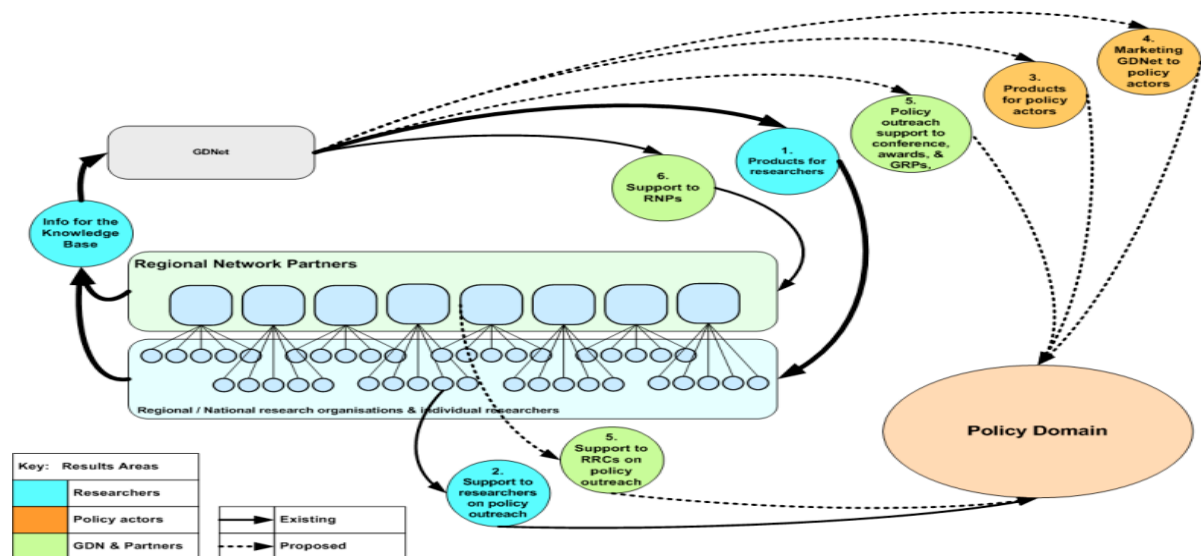
GDNNet, as part of GDN, firmly subscribed to the premise that good policy research, properly applied, can accelerate development and improve people’s lives through informing better policy making. Thus, GDNNet’s outline theory of change is that supporting better research in developing and transition countries and communicating that research within the research community and hence to policy makers, will lead to better policy making in those countries as shown below:



Knowledge flows to support better policy outreach

Over time, GDNNet’s goals evolved to become more focused on promoting the use of research findings in policy making. A 2009 review of GDNNet2, undertaken by Britain’s development agency DfID, played a role in motivating this shift; it suggested that GDNNet should shift its focus from being a knowledge hub to being a knowledge broker in order to meet its aim in informing policy making.

Though GDNNet maintains its emphasis on the supply side (i.e. in support of producers of research), it has begun to address the demand side of knowledge brokerage through initiatives such as that with the **Center for the Implementation of Public Policies Promoting Equity and Growth (CIPPEC)**, “Spaces for Engagement: using knowledge to improve public decisions.”



The overarching aim of GDNNet has consistently been that the diverse research and policy audience make better use of development research from the global South. The logical framework of GDNNet final phase of funding 2010 – 2014 outlined GDNNet’s intended outputs as:

- Southern research, which is better informed by current ideas and knowledge
- Researchers to better able to communicate their research to policy
- Knowledge networking between researchers and with policy actors increased
- Lessons about effective knowledge brokering in the global south learnt and communicated

2. Targeting the Right Audience

GNet supported researchers and their research findings should reach as wide an audience as possible so that development decisions are more likely to be informed by the best available local knowledge. This was consistently done through:

- **Fostering Southern ownership;** so that GNet's objectives were aligned with its regional partners' objectives, and activities jointly planned and monitored. GNet linked institutes and researchers in developing countries into a global network to showcase their work.
- **Promoting and strengthening a Southern voice.** GNet provided channels to communicate research from and for the South, together with a well-established network of global and local partners.
- **Strengthening communications capacity** targeted at researchers and research institutes through training and professional support in knowledge management and research communications to inform policy debates.
- **Empowering researchers from the Southern countries** to access global knowledge including through access to journals and data sets and to engage in development policy debates to supply decision makers with evidence based research.

3. Supporting Research Communications

GNet focused on providing information and encouraging sharing and learning. GNet helped create an enabling environment for southern researchers to communicate their work better and more widely. The latest strategy (2010-2014) positioned GNet as a leading knowledge service provider focusing on research communications from and for the South. DFID funding for GNet for this period amounted to £3.52 million.

Six key highlights particularly stood out:

Sharing knowledge

"GNet has helped me to disseminate my findings to people I didn't know, who in turn, have helped my research by providing feedback on it." Professor, Delhi

GNet long acknowledged the value of southern research and the distinctive contribution the southern perspective can make to the knowledge and understanding of complex issues. By

providing platforms that profile their work and opportunities to engage with others, GDNNet began to level the playing field between southern researchers and their northern counterparts. Thus:

GDNNet knowledge services provided access to over 1000 free journals. 32,000 subscribers received the 'Research in Focus' newsletter, 8000 subscribers received the 'Funding Opportunities' newsletter and the Knowledgebase made available as a free public good to all.

GDNNet knowledgebase held more than 22,000 research documents repackaged into regional and thematic portals, helping researchers to find information more easily. GDNNet Thematic Windows, which were launched in 2011, organized research papers and researcher profiles from the GDNNet Knowledgebase to reflect 23 major policy and development-related topics, from agriculture to urbanization.

Linking research to policy

GDNNet's work was underpinned by the belief that good research leads to better policy-making and with considerable demand for the training and support GDNNet provided to researchers on writing for policy. GDNNet had developed with CIPPEC a series of online courses to Build Influence Plans and a special platform to debate issues of critical importance to Executive Directors of Think Tanks in Latin America, worked with the **Economic Research Forum (ERF)** to produce a collection of papers, policy perspectives and reports and organized a series of two day workshops with the **African Economic Research Consortium** for African Researchers on how to influence policy decisions in their respective countries with their research results. It launched the Developing Critical Thinking Capacity Project to gain a greater and more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities for research uptake among think tanks and policy research institutes in developing countries

"My policy worldview has been radically transformed after this course – and this will be beneficial not only to me, but my Institute." Participant in GDNNet/CIPPEC Spaces for Engagement online course

GDNNet's capacity building work aimed to increase researchers' confidence and their ability to communicate their research more effectively. During the life of the program, more than 1200 researchers benefited from regional knowledge management and regional research communications training events in Latin America, Africa, the MENA region and South Asia. Assessments of recent workshops demonstrate that they significantly increased both the confidence and ability of the participants to communicate research to policy.

Improved monitoring, evaluation and learning

GDNNet placed a greater focus on understanding the reach and impact of its work, resulting in a baseline study of the program and a systematic monitoring and evaluation framework. The GDNNet Team also committed to reflecting on what it had learnt about good practice in knowledge

brokering for the Global South and sharing its experiences and lessons as widely as possible. In 2011, this included commissioning studies, presenting at conferences, an academic journal article, network participation and social media.

Better technical support

In order to develop online services that meet the needs of an ever-growing membership, GDNNet kept up with the rapid changes in technological innovation. Recent examples include cloud computing expansion completed in Egypt and the UK and the GDNNet Community Groups, engaging registered researchers through blogs, photo galleries, message boards, and more. GDNNet was amongst the leading programs using social media and networks to support its growing community.

Working in partnership

Sharing knowledge, making a difference and fostering connections between researchers and decision-makers were at the heart of GDNNet's work. GDNNet could not have achieved its ambition alone and a core element of the program was forging suitable partnerships to extend the reach and impact its work as widely as possible. One such example is GDNNet's Latin American Partnership Program with CIPPEC that became a valued source of expertise in the region on how to improve the use of research in public policy.

The challenges facing southern researchers are as great as ever, as is the need for their knowledge and experience to inform responses to development problems. In 2012, GDNNet responded to this with its '**Connect South**' campaign: a series of activities designed to focus attention on the value of southern research and the distinctive contribution the southern perspective can make to the

An ambitious program from the start, GDNNet had evolved from being an online repository of southern knowledge to a program dedicated to creating an enabling environment for southern researchers to inform policy.

GDNNet: In numbers

- The GDNNet Knowledgebase, an online portal to development research produced in developing countries, contained more than 22,000 research papers.
- GDNNet's members include 21,000 researchers and institutions from developing and transition countries.
- GDNNet provides southern researchers with free access to over 1,000 online journals.
- 32,000 subscribers receive GDNNet's Research in Focus newsletter to keep them abreast of the latest policy research knowledge from the Global South.

4. Ending the Program

A number of external key factors brought the program to an end in June 2014. These include:

Increased competition: In recent years the number of thematic portals, networks and communities of practice have multiplied, all aiming to increase the availability and uptake of development research and help development actors connect with one another.

Changing funding climate: While membership and use of its online knowledge services continued to grow to the very end, changes in the funding climate suggested that donors will be supporting programs that demonstrate demand-led innovation, value for money and a clear niche.

Strategic integration: Difficulty to integrate with GDN new strategic directions towards research capacity building and adapting GNet knowledge services to take forward the latest strategic ambitions of GDN.

The impact of technology: the GNet portal was built around enabling access to knowledge, but in the light of the increase in freely available research and data, how relevant are certain aspects of this model? As the way people search for and access information online changes, digital content needs to be highly relevant to search terms and accessible through different channels (e.g. mobile applications, YouTube, social networks, etc.)

5. Lessons Learnt

Of particular interest and relevance are five key lessons learnt:

- 1) First and foremost is adopting a **strategic approach to program conceptualization, implementation and management** . In the case of GNet solid **theory of change** with a clear focus on impact and utilizing **log-frames** as a management tool has been instrumental to successful management and program completion. A well-established **monitoring and evaluation system** is strongly recommended. *The GNet Legacy – Reflecting on the achievements, outcomes and learning of the GNet programme, 2010 – 2014 and Learning by Design – Perspectives on monitoring and evaluating a southern-focused knowledge service* can be referred to for more details.

- 2) **Listening to key stakeholders to effectively address demand and fulfill expectations.** The GNet team was in contact with thousands of Southern researchers during the lifetime of the program and heard directly from them about the challenges they face in doing research and influencing policy and what they needed in order to overcome them. Key insights are captured in *Listening to the South – What GNet has learned about Southern researchers, their challenges and their needs.*

- 3) **Becoming better capacity builders is instrumental.** Getting our own capacity built first, selecting participants, designing programs, doing things differently, thinking about sustainability, learning from partners' good practice, piloting online courses are but a few of what is captured and shared in *Becoming Better capacity Builders – What GNet has learned about developing country researchers' confidence and ability to communicate their research* that are worth consideration.

- 4) **Using social media to raise the profile of Southern research** is of particular relevance worth checking. It outlines the challenges GNet has faced in using social media to promote Southern research, setting up and sustaining an online community, how social media became central to and fully integrated in GNet activities, M & E and gives top tips for using social media.

- 5) **Shifting to a new knowledge approach.** Referred to by some as “**think nets**”, a number of initiatives have recently emerged that use online tools to enable questions to be asked and practical knowledge and ideas to be produced, shared and debated in a timely fashion to further progress in development. In May 2013, *'Politics and Ideas: a think net'* was launched as a pilot project created by CIPPEC: *On Think Tanks and GNet*, to encourage the sharing of innovative policy ideas from developing countries and challenge the dominance of Northern research knowledge. Think nets combine elements of a development think tank, a community of practice and a knowledge network. They aim to respond to emerging development issues, influence change, catalyze the generation and sharing of practical knowledge and bring together people from different backgrounds and disciplines.

6. Useful Reference Material

There are many publications that reflect on GNet learning, advice and know-how that GNet has left behind as part of its legacy. Below is a selection of documents that can be found at the project record on *DFID Research for Development Portal*.

Publications

'Listening to the South: What GNet has learned about Southern researchers, their challenges and their needs', S. Emara and C. Brown, June 2014.

'Becoming better capacity builders: What GNet has learned about building researchers' confidence and ability to communicate their research', Z. Sabet, June 2014.

'Making connections: What GDNNet has learned about using social media to raise the profile of Southern research', by Z. Sabet and S. Emara, GDNNet, June 2014.

'Learning by design: Perspectives on monitoring and evaluating a Southern-focused Knowledge service', by S. Ghoneim (GDNNet) and R. Gregorowski (Itad), June 2014.

Conference Papers

'Capacity building of knowledge management among research institutes: reflections from the GDNNet experience', S. Ghoneim and C. Brown, 2011. Produced for the 20th Anniversary Summit of the African Capacity Building Foundation.

'Research in development: what does it take to make a difference? GDNNet – Connect South – Challenges and Lessons Learnt', S. Ghoneim, 2011. Based on a keynote presentation given at the opening session of the 2011 World Association for Sustainable Development Conference, New Jersey, USA.

Tips on research communication, (in collaboration with CommsConsult)

Presentation Skills A compilation of seven workshop handouts providing guidelines for how to give a great presentation.

Developing an Influence Plan A range of learning materials that cover the plan's implications, challenges and structure.

Effective Communication for Southern Researchers Topics include writing a policy brief and data visualisation.

Using Media to Communicate Research Outputs Covering topics such as how to give a media interview, how to make news and how to write for the media.

Commissioned Studies:

'Implementing a gender audit of an online knowledge service: The experience of GDNNet', Cheryl Brown, 2013. Explores gender-based barriers to the use of online knowledge services and proposes a gender audit tool for GDNNet to use with its online services.

'Are southern academics virtually connected? A review of the adoption of web 2.0 tools for research collaboration by development researchers in the South' Cheryl Brown, 2011. Commissioned to help GDNNet understand what it might need to do to help more Southern researchers use web 2.0 tools for research collaboration and knowledge-sharing.

7. Acknowledgements

This document is primarily based on the GNet strategy document, management, monitoring and evaluation reports and the series of learning publications listed above.

The program's successful completion is thanks to the commitment of the GNet team whose contributions to the learning documents has ensured sustained value of the program even beyond closure.

GNet team: Sherine Ghoneim, Haitham El Khouly, Aalaa Naguib, Dina Abou Saada, Dina Mannaa, Reem Mansour, Zeinab Sabet and Shahira Emara. The publication also draws on reports produced for GNet by its Monitoring & Evaluation advisor, Itad (available from GNet's 2005-2009 and 2010-2014 project records on the *DFID Research for Development* portal). Cheryl Brown's editorial and coordination of learning publications is gratefully acknowledged.