

LISTENING TO THE SOUTH

What GNet has learned about Southern researchers, their challenges and their needs

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This is one of a series of short publications through which GNet and its partners reflect on what they have learned about supporting Southern researchers to contribute and debate research in development thinking, policy and practice.



GNet has always been firmly oriented towards the South, focused on bringing Southern research to the world's attention and increasing researchers' confidence and ability to communicate their own work. While many online knowledge services count Southern researchers among their target audiences and/or include Southern research in their repositories, Southern researchers' needs (especially the need to raise the profile of their research) have been the primary consideration for GNet and the reference point for GNet's programme design. The GNet team has been in contact with thousands of Southern researchers during the life of the programme and has heard directly from them about the challenges they face in doing research and influencing policy, and what they need in order to overcome them. As the GNet programme draws to a close, we hope that these insights will be of value to those who share our commitment to support Southern researchers and increase the uptake of their research.

What concerns Southern researchers?



We have sifted through surveys of GNet Members (those who had created a Researcher's Profile on the GNet website), video interviews and written submissions from GNet's workshop participants and social media followers [see *About our sources*, p.5]. In this section, we present the challenges that stood out most for us during our analysis, namely those that appeared most frequently, those that were stated most emphatically or those that seemed particularly important for others to hear. Our analysis is inevitably subjective and we invite you to explore the sources yourself to see what are the 'loudest' messages for you.

Researchers need more funding

It is no surprise that money comes at the top of the wish-list with over two-thirds of the respondents to the 2013 GNet Members' survey citing limited funding opportunities as one of the most significant challenges facing Southern researchers today. Academics need funding to access journals and datasets to do their research and to see the results published in peer-reviewed journals, but these are often hidden behind walls of subscriptions.

Researchers also need funding to cover the time to do the research and participate in research teams, to allocate towards research equipment and software, publishing research and presenting their work at regional and international events. Travel grants are particularly in demand so that Southern researchers can enjoy the same level of access to global platforms and opportunities for networking that their Northern counterparts have. Despite these limited resources, researchers are pursuing their research questions, but acknowledge that the quality of the research and its outreach is compromised as a result.



Josephine Ndambuki (Egerton University, Kenya) [[video](#)]

Researchers need more access to journals and data sets

It is impossible to do state of the art research without access to data which is why being granted access to the wealth of current knowledge available via prestigious journals and dataset providers is high on Southern researchers' lists of demands. 73% of GNet Members, for example, believe it is very important to continue providing access to publications in the JStor and Project MUSE archives. Researchers tell us that

data from local sources is frequently scarce, unavailable, or obsolete. Respondents to GDNNet's latest survey reported that the second biggest challenge they face is lack of access to journals and data, and we often heard complaints about Southern universities not being able to afford to provide access to good quality academic journals. As Saifedean Ammous (pictured below) told us, locking peer-reviewed research behind paywalls means it is fast-becoming 'peer-only-reviewed' research with those in related fields unable to access it. Removing the cost of subscriptions is only part of the solution; researchers report other barriers to accessing online journals including insufficient bandwidth, a problem experienced by some researchers based at African universities, for example, and a challenge that the DFID-funded [INASP programme](#) is helping to address.



Saifedean Ammous (Lebanese American University) [\[video\]](#)

There are North-South and gender divides in research

The perception that Southern research is of inferior quality to research from the North was reported as the third biggest challenge facing Southern researchers in the latest GDNNet survey (45% of Southern respondents). GDNNet members strongly support the need for a channel to raise the profile of Southern perspectives. Allied to this, over a quarter of respondents feel that the peer review process is biased against Southern researchers. We were concerned to hear in one of our interviews that female researchers may be experiencing additional challenges, such as having to go through several approval loops in order to undertake research, or their role and findings being undervalued on the basis of their gender.

Nearly a quarter of Southern researchers tell us that they themselves read more Northern than Southern research. However, their explanations for why this is the case suggest that it is often due to availability rather than choice:

"Northern research outputs are usually published online and easier to access than Southern research."

"It's not a choice at all. Other than access to my country research database I have too little access to other Southern countries, aside from [the] GDNNet platform."

What do we mean by 'the South'?

GDNNet uses the terms 'South' and 'Southern' frequently, but we recognise there are varied definitions and values attached to these words. Some find 'the South' preferable to 'developing and transition countries'; others view it as a meaningless or unhelpful label. For some, such as GDNNet, 'South' and 'Southern' are badges of honour. 'The South' and 'the North' are frequently used to refer to sets of countries that fall into a particular category of economic, political and social development, the South being "a convenient synonym for the set of developing countries, which bears only limited relationship to their geographical locations." (Bakewell, 2009, p.2). The Gross National Income (GNI) per capita is used by the World Bank to categorise countries, with those countries in the high income category being the ones classed as 'Northern'. This is the approach GDNNet uses, for example, when analysing survey data from its members.



In 1987 the South Commission was established, made up of members from "all the continents in the South, acting in their personal capacity" (South Commission, 1990, p.v). In 1990, the South Commission published a report entitled "The Challenge to the South", which calls on Southern countries to work together and use their collective power to negotiate with, and reduce their dependence upon, the North. The report recommended and led to the creation of the South Centre, an influential intergovernmental organisation, which has 51 member countries. In the South Commission's report, the term 'the South' is briefly defined as meaning developing countries or 'the Third World'. What makes their use of the term distinctive is that here, 'the South' is used deliberately to create unity - to foster cooperation while recognising the differences between the countries. In this manner, it is very similar to GDNNet's use of the phrase 'Connect South' as a rallying cry and is the spirit in which we use the term in this publication.

Over a third of respondents told us that they do not distinguish between Northern and Southern research. Several of the explanatory comments they provided suggest they are more interested in research quality, methodology or relevance than country of origin:

"Research is either good or bad. There can be no discrimination between North and South....I have seen examples of abysmal research from the North and brilliant work from the South and vice versa."

There is substantial demand from Southern researchers for locally-generated research with a third of GDNNet members saying they joined GDNNet in order to access it. We were pleased to hear from nearly three quarters of Southern researchers surveyed that they have seen an increase in the use of Southern research in recent years with nearly 20% reporting that it has greatly increased. In terms of quality, our survey suggests that this is also improving, albeit to a lesser degree (the proportion of respondents that consider it to be 'good' or 'excellent', is 62.5%, up from 57.7% in 2012).

The respondents were asked to give an explanation for their opinion about the level of use of Southern research and their comments suggest that, where the challenges highlighted in this publication have been addressed (such as access to online journals), this is having a positive impact upon the uptake of Southern research. The main explanations GDNNet Members gave for increased use of Southern research were:

Improved research quality

"More Southern researchers are becoming visible because of the quality of their research."

Increased output and dissemination

"In Brazil, the number of journals increased."

"[the] internet has provided greater outreach for those with adequate capacity and facility."

More researchers and funding for research

"There is a bit more funding for research generated by Southern researchers, but the outlets are much the same."

"There are more researchers and there is a lot of excitement about working in the emerging markets area."

Better access to journals and information

"[it is] easier to publish in international journals because access to latest issues [of] journals has improved."

Better linkages:

"Growth in communications and collaborations between Southern and Northern researchers."

"More researchers contributing, learning and sharing."

Researchers want to learn about research communications

As mentioned above, the level of good quality research produced in the South is on the rise and researchers are keen to see it have an impact upon policy decisions. Sadly, not enough of that research meets that aim because it fails to reach its intended audience. Researchers do not necessarily have the skills they need to communicate research effectively to potential research users. Academics tend to write about their research in long publications and use highly technical language. Many Southern researchers acknowledge this and express demand for support in research communications. Over half of the Southern survey respondents (59%), for

example, said it was very important for them to have access to online toolkits and guides on how to communicate research.

GDNNet's Research Communication Capacity Building workshops, online courses and guides have been designed around what researchers have told us they need. This has led to the inclusion of content on: how to craft messages, write policy briefs, talk to the media and produce press releases, draft policy recommendations, create and monitor influence plans, and use social media for dissemination and uptake, among other topics.

Making improvements in ability and confidence to communicate research is only part of the solution to helping Southern research reach, and be used by, policymakers and practitioners. There need to be opportunities for research to be shared (websites, networks, etc.) but nearly a third of our Southern survey respondents say that these are limited and constitute one of the main challenges that they face. Researchers have told us that when they lack official channels, they have found dissemination workshops and one-to-one interviews with the media to be effective methods of getting their research out. The case studies of Southern research uptake in GDNNet's M&E report, 2013, illustrate the success these methods can have.



Prof. William Lyakurwa (AERC Executive Director) [\[video\]](#)

Researchers want to get closer to policymakers

The "policy panel", a tool we have used in our capacity building workshops, has enabled researchers to hear first hand about the practical challenges local policymakers face in accessing and using research evidence for policymaking. During the panel, policymakers also suggested what researchers could do to increase the likelihood of their research being used (see GDNNet's learning publication '*Becoming Better Capacity Builders*' p.3). A key recommendation was for researchers to respond to policymakers' needs, and ideally, involve them in the research process early on. However, as many researchers report, connecting with policymakers and the policymaking process is easier said than done.



Participants of an AERC-GDNet Policy Brief Workshop share their views on some of the challenges experienced when trying to reach policymakers [\[blog\]](#)

Researchers need more opportunities for South-South interaction

The research environment is becoming increasingly interconnected, with international collaboration on the rise (Adams, Gurney and Marshall, 2007). However, some countries’ researchers are more able than others to participate in this trend or to inform decisions being made that affect their own countries. We have learned that researchers experience barriers in terms of putting together research ideas, connecting with others to form research teams and exchanging information with those working on the same theme, even within their own region. It is the belief of some of our members that where Southern researchers have more opportunity to interact with their colleagues globally, it has led to improvements in the quality of the resulting research outputs. One particular mechanism of South-South learning that seems to be in demand, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, is mentoring. At a local level, there is a need for experienced researchers to help those who are at the start of their careers to apply their theoretical knowledge about data collection, analysis and quality.

Bibliography:

Adams, J., Gurney, K. & Marshall, S. (2007). *Patterns of international collaboration for the UK and leading partners*, Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills: London.

Bakewell, O., (2009). *South-South Migration and Human Development: Reflections on African Experiences*. Human Development Research Paper Series , Vol. 07, No. 2009.

Gregorowski, R., Ellis, J., and Brown, C., (2014), *GDNet M&E Report 2014 - Year 3*, Hove: Itad.

South Commission (1990), *The Challenge to the South: The Report of the South Commission*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Our only recommendation to donors and other online knowledge services is for them to make time to listen to the South...

Southern researchers are acutely aware of what they need in order to have a greater impact on the problems facing the world. Here are a few of their ideas that we think you should hear:

Support Southern networking and dissemination:

“A platform should be established to facilitate cross-border research between researchers.”

“Southern researchers must be given more opportunities to present their papers in the knowledge fairs.”

“We also need more South-South cooperation and opportunities to travel to seminars, conferences and workshops...we also need more sources of funds to attend such meetings.”

Provide access to data and research:

“Southern researchers need access to more online journals, databases and subject specific softwares.”

“Provide and publicise access to online publication to Southern researchers from the francophone countries. A lot of good researches are being conducted there.”

Fund research capacity building:

“Put more funds in training researchers rather [than] carrying out secondary research in analysing policies which are not practical to the community needs because we need current information to address the daily challenges.”

“Efforts to improve Southern research should focus on bring it closer to ‘Northern research’ standards, to ‘Northern’ researchers and their networks.”

Ensure there is a Southern-focused online service:

78% of GDNet’s survey respondents agreed this would be important after the GDNet programme closed because...

“...the interests and the understanding in Southern countries is usually not understood and valued in Northern countries.”

“...it provides an alternative source of information that features Southern researchers' perspectives.”

“Southern researchers need a platform to share their research and connect with other researchers.”

“...the Southern-focused development challenges will be drowned by other global issues.”

“I don't know any other platform where it is possible to share Southern research.”

See *Related Resources*, p.5, for examples of DFID-funded programmes that support uptake of Southern research.

About our sources

We have only drawn on what Southern researchers themselves have told us, including in video interviews, comments posted on GDNNet's social media and post-workshop communications. We cross-referenced these sources with analysis of the annual GDNNet members' in-depth survey, which, in its latest round, captured the views of 450 GDNNet members based in the South. The data has certain limitations being obtained through an opt-in online survey sent to all members, so respondents are more likely to be those with strong views, particularly engaged with GDNNet or that have better internet connections. The latest survey (sent after the impending closure of the GDNNet programme had been communicated) specifically invited members to participate on the basis that their views would be shared with those funding and working in the knowledge-brokering and intermediary sector. For most questions the number of responses was enough to produce a five percent margin of error (commonly considered acceptable for social science research), i.e. any statistics reported about the survey respondents could be up to five percentage points higher or lower among the total GDNNet membership. We have provided links to the full interviews for quotes used in this publication and much of our source material is available online within GDNNet's annual Monitoring & Evaluation Reports and GDNNet's social media channels:

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/user/gdnetcairo>

GDNNet Blog: <http://gdnetblog.org/>

Connect South LinkedIn Group:

<https://www.linkedin.com/groups/Connect-South-campaign-4465483>

Publications: <http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/Project/60734/>

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Related Resources

GDNNet Publications

- 'Becoming Better Capacity Builders', Zeinab Sabet, GDNNet, 2014.
- 'Are Southern academics virtually connected?', Cheryl Brown, 2011. GDNNet's study on web 2.0 uptake by Southern researchers.
- 'Research in development: what does it take to make a difference? GDNNet – Connect South – Challenges & Lessons Learnt', Sherine Ghoneim, GDNNet, 2011.

All available to download from GDNNet's project record on DFID's Research For Development (R4D) portal at <http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/Project/60734/>

Other DFID-funded programmes that support Southern research uptake include:

INASP: aims to strengthen access to, production and use of knowledge and evidence in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Activities include its [AuthorAid portal](#) and provision of access to several [collections of free online journals](#) from the South.

British Library for Development Studies (BLDS): BLDS's [Digital Library](#) makes full-text copies of developing country research more available online through digitisation and indexing.

Eldis: an online information service providing free access to relevant, up-to-date and diverse research on international development issues. Eldis is committed to increasing the volume of Southern research in its collection.

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