Research in development: what does it take to make a difference?

GDNet – Connect South – Challenges & Lessons Learnt

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About GDNet
GDNet is a Global Development Network (GDN) program which supports southern researchers to contribute and debate ideas in development thinking, policy and practice. GDNet is managed by the GDN Cairo Team in partnership with the Economic Research Forum (ERF) and works in collaboration with local and international organizations for much of its regional work.

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1.   ABSTRACT

GDNet has been raising the global profile of knowledge from developing and transition countries for 10 years. But the need for research findings from these countries, (sometimes referred to collectively as the South), to be heard by decision-makers worldwide has never been greater. The Global Society has evolved more rapidly in the last decade than in the past 50 years. The continued impacts of the financial crisis, the revolutions and riots experienced in almost every continent, the spectres of climate change and new diseases are creating new challenges for the developed and developing world.

From this upheaval emerges a need for knowledge and experience from the South to play a more prominent role in policy decisions at every level, whether community, national, regional or international. The research environment is becoming increasingly interconnected, with international collaboration on the rise. The inclusion of southern knowledge is critical to transforming economic growth into sustainable social and economic development, and developing a global infrastructure that is resilient to new global challenges.

GDNet is managed by the Global Development Network (GDN), an international organisation dedicated to helping social scientists from across the South generate new knowledge on development. Sharing knowledge, making a difference and fostering connections between researchers and decision-makers from different countries are at the heart of GDNet's work. The 10th anniversary of GDNet's launch is a fitting point at which to review the need for research and policy communities to "Connect South" and to reflect on GDNet's experiences in supporting southern research to inform decisions that have global impacts.

Keywords: knowledge sharing, research communication, Global South, economic development, sustainable development, GDNet, GDN.

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[1] This paper is based on the background paper for the keynote presentation given by Sherine Ghoneim at the opening session of the World Association for Sustainable Development Conference, October 26th to 28th, 2011, Atlantic City, New Jersey, USA.

2. INTRODUCTION

"Being located in a university which does not have much infrastructural support as far as research is concerned, budding researchers like me would be de-motivated to bring out serious studies due to lack of access to other studies taking place all over the world. GDNet has come as a new lease of life to me." This comment received in the November 2010 survey of GDNet members (ITAD, 2010) illustrates the reality for thousands of junior researchers in developing countries and as GDNet celebrates its 10th anniversary, it is a reminder that the need it seeks to meet is as great as ever.

GDNet supports southern researchers to contribute and debate ideas in development thinking, practice and policy. It does this in two main ways: helping researchers' research findings to travel further through GDNet's online activities, and building researchers' confidence and ability to communicate their knowledge by providing training workshops and creating spaces for them to interact with policy audiences and other researchers. GDNet is managed by the Cairo Team of the Global Development Network (GDN), an international organization dedicated to helping social scientists from across the South generate new knowledge on development, and it partners with local and international organizations for much of its regional work.

This paper seeks to present the case for GDNet's emphasis on connecting the South with global debates on sustainable development, to explore some of the challenges this presents for researchers in developing countries and to outline the work that GDNet is doing to try to meet them.

3. CORE ARGUMENT/ESSENCE OF PAPER

Before exploring the case for connecting the South with global debates on sustainable development, it is helpful to define what is meant by the term "South" (or "Global South"). GDNet and GDN exist to support researchers in developing and transition countries. While research capacity varies widely between these countries, the expression "the South" is used as a collective noun to enable a comparison to be made between the experiences of these researchers, with those of researchers in the North (especially those in OECD countries). There are a number of approaches to classifying countries as being North or South, but the one used in this paper is that adopted by the UNDP, which in its 2009 Human Development Report, defined the South as all those countries with a Human Development Index score of below 0.9. (Bakewell, 2009). As Figure 1 illustrates, using data from the 2010 Human Development Report, the vast majority of countries with a Very High HDI score (those considered belonging to "the North") are predominantly located in the northern hemisphere.
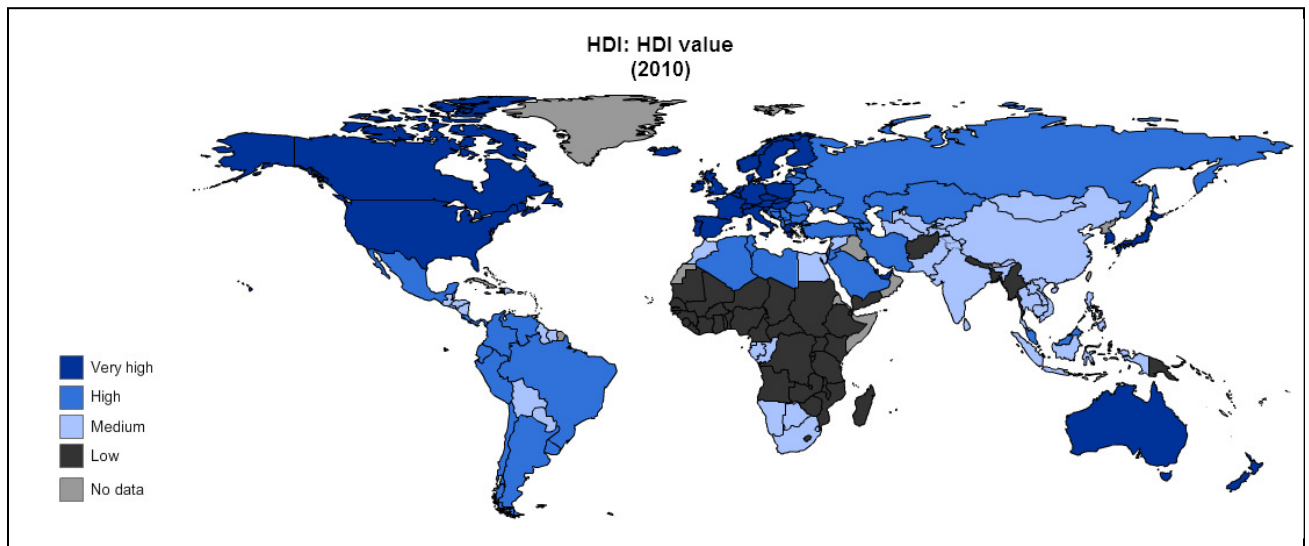
Figure 1: Countries of the world classified by their Human Development Index (HDI) value

The urgent need for greater global research cooperation

GDNet has been raising the global profile of southern knowledge since 2001 and is proud of what it has achieved in that time but 10 years on, changes in the world mean the need for research findings from southern countries to be heard by decision-makers worldwide has never been greater. The Global Society has evolved more rapidly in the last decade than in the past 50 years and the actions of a single country can have far-reaching impacts on other parts of the world. While the income gap between the wealthiest and poorest people continues to widen in most regions of the world (ILO, 2008), the effects of financial crises experienced in wealthy nations are being felt by those living thousands of miles away. In recent times the world has witnessed dramatic revolutions and riots on almost every continent and these too can have global consequences, while the twin spectres of climate change and new communicable diseases are also creating challenges that cannot be confined within geographical borders. As President Clinton stated in a 2010 American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt conference, "We cannot create a world where our actions have no impact on others, and what happens to others has no impact on us." (AmCham, 2010).

From this upheaval emerges a need for knowledge and experience from the South to play a more prominent role in responses to global challenges, whether at community, national, regional or international level. 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. In the field of ICT for development

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(ICTD), for example, a study found that the "African contribution to international academic research in ICTD is very low, typically between 1% and 9% percent of publications across subdisciplines," (Gitau, Plantinga and Diga, 2010, p.5). The inclusion of southern knowledge is critical to transforming economic growth into sustainable social and economic development, and developing a global infrastructure that is resilient to new challenges.

How GDNet has evolved since 2001

GDNet too has changed in the last decade, in response to the changing environment and from learning more about the challenges facing researchers in the South and how best to respond to them. Initially, GDNet's knowledge brokering focused on developing a central online portal of research from the South: a dedicated space to profile the work of southern researchers. This database exists today as the GDNet Knowledgebase, and now features more than 11,600 researcher profiles, around 17,500 research papers and details of over 4,700 research organizations from the South. Early in the program's life, GDNet identified that the cultural and infrastructural challenges in the South at the time meant that deploying technology was not sufficient in itself to ignite interest from southern researchers. In order to support and encourage researchers to register an online profile and to submit their research, GDNet appointed Regional Coordinators who had access to regional research networks and made them responsible for identifying researchers and papers from their region. The portal was also re-organised so it could be browsed through Regional Windows. More recently, the portal has been adapted to introduce a thematic approach, so it now reflects emerging global challenges and helps researchers identify potential peers as well as raising further the profiles of researchers and their work to those who share their interests. There are plans to augment the portal in the future by developing micro-sites that will become reference points for southern knowledge on key development issues and by incorporating web 2.0 tools that support research collaboration.

In the area of capacity building, GDNet started with a focus on knowledge management in research institutes, through training workshops, online toolkits and regional conferences where lessons learned in knowledge management capacity building were captured and shared. Over time the emphasis has shifted to supporting individual researchers and responding to their interests, rather than building institutional knowledge management capacity. As a result, the focus of GDNet's capacity building and services is now on communicating research to policy and helping researchers improve the uptake and impact of their work.

The GDNet Theory of Change

The GDNet program 2010 to 2014 is based on a set of beliefs, or a "theory of change", about how southern research can contribute to development. By articulating its theory of how change happens, GDNet has been able to clarify the core areas of work it should pursue. GDNet firmly subscribes to the premise that good policy research, properly applied, can accelerate development and improve people's lives through informing better policy making. Thus, GDNet's

outline theory of change is that supporting better research in the South and communicating that research within the global research community and hence to policy makers, will lead to better policy making in those countries (as illustrated in Figure 2). This theory has been translated into a logical framework (or logframe) which informs GDNet's planning and decision-making. The logframe also forms the basis for GDNet's monitoring and evaluation framework through which the program is collecting robust evidence about its implementation and contribution to change, continuing to learn about how to improve its work, and sharing this learning with others as much as possible. Key elements of the GDNet logframe are captured in Box 1.


GDNet's Goal, Purpose and Outputs

Goal: Better policy informed by better research

Purpose: Diverse research and policy audiences make better use of development research
                from the global south

Outputs
  ➢ Southern research better informed by current ideas and knowledge
  ➢ Researchers better able to communicate their research to policy
  ➢ Knowledge networking between researchers and with policy actors increased
  ➢ Lessons about knowledge brokering best practice in the Global South learnt and
    communicated

Box 1: taken from GDNet's logframe 2010 to 2014

Another way of viewing the GDNet program is in terms of clusters of activities which individually are not sufficient in themselves to bring about the change that GDNet is aiming for, but combine to create an enabling environment for southern researchers to inform policy. These clusters can be summarized as:
- brokering information from and for southern researchers;
- building southern capacity in communicating research to policy;
- creating spaces for engagement between researchers and policy makers.

Cutting across all three clusters are two important ways in which GDNet aims to work: delivering the GDNet program in collaboration with Regional Network Partners and sharing lessons learnt about knowledge brokering in the South, with others in the sector.

GDNet is committed to research communications from and for the Global South and aims to be an internationally recognized focal point and knowledge broker for development research to inform policy debates. To deliver on this however, GDNet needed to articulate some of the conditions necessary for southern research to inform policy and the assumptions being made in its theory of change. Assumptions are a key element of a logframe, and two of the assumptions upon which GDNet bases its work are included in the summary theory of change in Figure 2 (highlighted in blue).

Figure 2: Summary of GDNet's Theory of Change
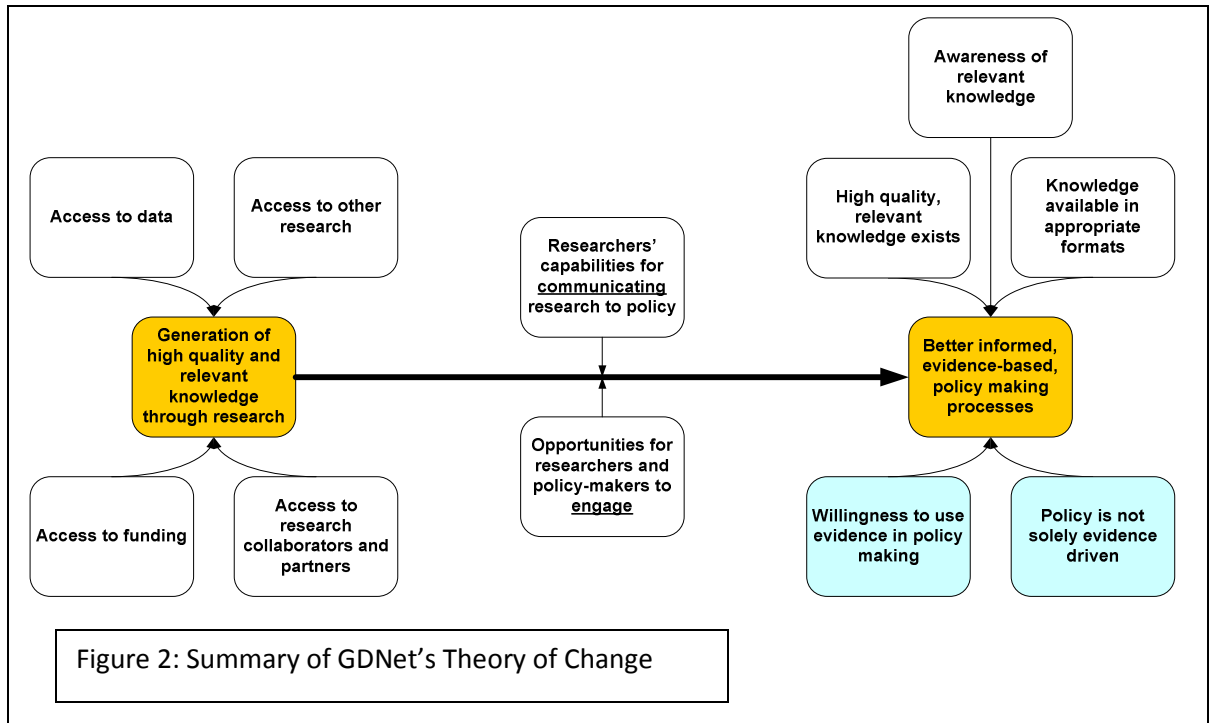
As a result of this exercise, GDNet identified certain challenges facing southern researchers which have been supported by research carried out among GDNet's members - southern researchers based in research institutes in the South (ITAD, 2010). Some of the key challenges are: accessing development research and data, securing research funding, communicating research findings to peers and policy audiences, and perceptions of (and demand for) southern research. These are explored below with examples of how GDNet is responding to them.

Challenge 1: accessing development research and data

Having reliable access to quality research and important datasets is essential for any researcher but is expensive and beyond the budget of many of those based in the South. In particular, being able to read the latest academic research in their field is critical if researchers are to build on the work of others and have the references they need in order to produce research papers that will themselves be published. Lack of access may even be factor that prevents a southern researcher from success in applying for research funding if they are required to demonstrate how it adds to an existing body of work.

Through partnerships with JSTOR, Project MUSE and the British Library for Development Studies, GDNet provides access to over 1,000 online journals for researchers based in southern research institutes. The current collection brings together a compilation of titles in Economics,

"GDNet's free access to academic journals can change the nature of research in developing countries which are beleaguered with poor resources" Researcher, South Africa
[Source: GDNet members survey]

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Finance, Education, Social Sciences, Political Science, Archaeology, Marketing, Management and more. From feedback received by members, GDNet's provision of data and journals is one of the most valuable and appreciated contributions it makes to the experience of southern researchers.

For many southern researchers however, lack of reliable internet access means even this service is beyond their reach. While data on internet access for southern researchers as a specific group is unavailable, according to the ITU (2010), at the end of 2009 an estimated 64% of people in developed countries were using the internet, but this was true of less than 20% of people in the developing world. To accommodate those researchers with limited internet access, GDNet incorporates a range of approaches to knowledge brokering that require less bandwidth and time online such as using summaries of research papers (available by email and RSS feed), so researchers can judge the relevance of a paper before downloading, and offering a free document delivery service (by post or email) of book chapters and journal articles held by the British Library for Development Studies.

Providing access may not be sufficient in itself for some researchers to use online resources. Information literacy, (the ability to search for, evaluate and use information) is an area of capacity development that has received particular attention in universities and research institutes in some northern countries. GDNet is starting to investigate how best to extend this to meet the needs of researchers in the South. The British Library for Development Studies is working with GDNet to develop specialised tools and training courses particularly focused at junior researchers in the South, to help them to take advantage of the online resources available to them.

Challenge 2: securing research funding

"…it is very difficult and competitive to get funding to work on independent research in the area we want. In very poor countries like Ethiopia where it is impossible to finance your higher education, getting funding for research is very hard. Some [funding opportunities] come with conditionality like I have to work on the topic they want me to do and have good connection with people who have the funding." [Source: GDNet members survey].

GDNet itself does not fund research, although its parent organisation, the Global Development Network provides a range of funding mechanisms specifically for southern researchers. However, it is aware that having access to news of funding opportunities is a key first step to getting funding, and to that end emails its members a fortnightly *Funding Opportunities Newsletter* which highlights the latest calls for funding applications for development researchers in the South. This newsletter includes relevant items from the *Community of Science* database, the most comprehensive collection of funding opportunities in the world. GDNet has also created an online toolkit for researchers on research proposal writing and fundraising.

Challenge 3: communicating research findings to peers and policy audiences

Communicating effectively is fundamental to increasing the impact of research. The challenge of reaching out to non-specialist audiences with different needs and appetites for knowledge, such as the media or policy-makers, is one experienced by researchers in every country. But in a field dominated by development research from the North, both in terms of volume of research production and resources available for research communication, an additional hurdle for southern researchers is how to become more visible. GDNet responds in three key ways: providing southern researchers with a platform to profile their work; building capacity in research communication; and creating opportunities for researchers to engage with others working in development policy and practice.

The aim behind the GDNet Knowledgebase is to be the place to find southern development researchers and their work. Free to use, it features more than 17,500 southern research papers which are accompanied by clear conclusion-based summaries and over 11,600 researcher profiles, and GDNet invests substantial resources in activities that increase awareness and use by global audiences of these databases.

GDNet's capacity building work aims to increase researchers' confidence and ability to communicate their research more effectively and carefully designs its training so that it is tailored to the participants' particular needs and includes ongoing support and mentoring. So far more than 1,100 researchers from 86 countries have benefited from GDNet regional knowledge management and research communications training events in Africa, Latin America and South Asia. The workshops are run with GDNet's regional partners and often facilitate inter-regional learning, for example, inviting Latin American researchers to present their experiences of developing policy briefs at a workshop for African researchers.

> "GDNet 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
>
> "As a researcher it can be quite isolating. GDNet provides a good resource for people in developing countries and a source of encouragement and enthusiasm"
>
> [Source: GDNet members survey]

Developing relationships and establishing links with decision makers is a natural step in the policy making process. GDNet encourages researchers to reach out to policy makers and offers advice on how to best interact with them on a range of issues. GDNet also provides southern researchers with guidance and support on how to write policy relevant materials and funds opportunities for researchers to engage directly with policy audiences.

Challenge 4: perceptions of, and demand for, southern research

"One of the major challenges that people like me face is to translate research into academic publications. These publications are structured around norms that are heavily tilted to meet standards dictated by northern pedagogical and academic practices. Similarly, we get difficulties in accessing recent books" [Source: GDNet members survey].

Feedback received from GDNet's members highlights the difficulty southern researchers have in getting their work published in academic journals. Participants of a GDNet conference on capacity building of knowledge management in African research institutes also commented on the dearth of articles authored by African researchers within journals focused on African research (GDN, 2007). As stated earlier in this paper, this may stem in part from lack of access to the latest journal articles that would help researchers' submissions pass a peer review, however some sources suggest that support for southern research is lacking among some publishers. An article on this topic (Arunachalam, 1999), cites a "New Scientist" editorial which stated that "editors of reputed international journals would more likely select the one from Harvard in preference to the one from Hyderabad -- even though both manuscripts may be of comparable quality. To most editors in the West, Harvard seems a sounder bet than Hyderabad." More recently, an article published by WHO reports that: "submissions from poor countries are usually evaluated by experts who may not be knowledgeable about the constraints associated with conducting research in these settings and, therefore, do not have a positive attitude to provide the guidance that may make the work publishable." (Langer et al., 2004).

It seems that provision of better access to academic research and training in how to write for peer-reviewed journals is only part of the solution GDNet needs to offer to meet this complicated challenge. GDNet's broader ambition is to advocate for the value southern research offers to global discussions on development. One aspect of this work is trying to understand more about the level of use of southern research, attitudes to its quality and the challenges southern researchers experience in having their voices heard; something GDNet has embedded into its monitoring and evaluation framework. The other, is to encourage the development research and policy communities to "Connect South".

What does it mean to Connect South?

Connect South is a call by GDNet to southern researchers to adopt certain behaviours that are key to having a greater impact, to the wider development research and policy communities to engage with the experiences and knowledge of the South, and also has implications for the way GDNet designs and implements its program.

For GDNet, to Connect South means involving southern researchers in its decision-making, responding to their needs and championing their cause. In practice, GDNet aims to:

i) promote and strengthen the southern voice. Southern voices need to be heard and the distinctive contribution the southern perspective can make to the knowledge and understanding of complex issues needs to be acknowledged. GDNet is committed to amplifying the voice of researchers in the Global South and through its networks, providing channels to communicate research from the South. Beyond this, GDNet needs to advocate for the value of southern research knowledge and its Connect South campaign, scheduled to run throughout 2012, is a step towards this.

ii) foster southern ownership. GDNet cannot achieve its ambitions on its own, and recognizes that it needs to develop in such a way that its objectives are aligned with southern partners' objectives, and activities are jointly planned and monitored. Research is a key part of this work, for example, an annual survey among members helps GDNet understand more about southern researchers' changing needs and how GDNet's services should adapt, while measures of satisfaction and use are integral to GDNet's reporting to its donors. New technologies that enable researchers to take a more active role in GDNet's knowledge brokering are being piloted, for example, supporting researchers to write blog posts, participate in online discussions, etc.

iii) empower southern researchers. While raising the profile of southern researchers and their work will continue to be a key part of GDNet's work, the best advocates for southern knowledge and views are the researchers themselves. This is why capacity building in research communications, providing necessary resources, and creating opportunities for researchers from southern countries to engage in development policy debates will continue to be so important. Southern researchers can sometimes feel isolated and miss out on the opportunity to collaborate with peers in other disciplines and countries. A key part of GDN's new strategy for 2011 to 2016 is the creation of an online platform that will support research collaboration and help researchers to connect with each other and GDNet is leading on the development and piloting of the collaborative aspect of this platform. One challenge will be to create something that genuinely promotes scientific collaboration and is recognized by researchers as being of value. An important element of GDNet's work in this area has been researching the adoption of such tools among southern researchers, the barriers they experience and how best to support researchers in using them (Brown, 2011). GDNet recognises that it will be vital to involve researchers in the design of the platform in order to avoid the costly mistakes of others who have tried to establish similar initiatives.

Connect South: an invitation to the world.

GDNet is not the only party with an interest in advocating for southern research knowledge and encouraging others to Connect South. Its objectives are shared by others in the field, including one of GDNet's main donors, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) who believe that research is more appropriate when it has been developed by researchers in the host country and has committed to exploring mechanisms that will raise the profile and use of southern-generated research, (DFID, 2008). DFID has also made it a requirement that all its

directly managed research consortia include southern researchers and have a capacity building component. Nor is this a mission that GDNet can achieve on its own. Collaboration and cooperation with individuals and organisations worldwide will be the key to success in this endeavour.

For southern researchers

Perhaps the most important people who will need to respond to the call to Connect South though are researchers in the South themselves. They will need to play their part in increasing the uptake and impact of their research by adopting certain behaviours that will make this more likely:

i) Searching for and using reliable research and data in order to keep their knowledge up-to-date, and to increase the likelihood that their research will be published and used. This is not without its challenges, as highlighted earlier in the paper, depending on the infrastructure in their research institutes and countries and their own level of information literacy.

ii) Submitting their research to knowledge intermediaries and communication channels that are used by those working globally in development research and policy and registering their profiles with websites such as GDNet. This may require a certain amount of investigation on the part of the researcher, having access to somewhere that can host their publications online and the ability to build relationships with the media, as well as making time for these activities.

iii) Participating in online and offline events, networks and discussions that will bring them into contact with those working globally in development research and policy. For online networking and communication this may require a researcher to adopt unfamiliar tools such as Twitter and blogs and learning to communicate their research to different audiences by attending workshops or using training tools.

Challenges for the Future

For GDNet, and others who are trying to encourage knowledge sharing and scientific collaboration between countries and regions, the future holds great promise, but there are also several challenges on the horizon. Emerging technologies, including those referred to as "web 2.0 tools", have the potential to revolutionise opportunities for research networking, dissemination and collaboration but there are risks of this happening in a non-systematic way and without necessary quality review mechanisms. Gaining sufficient funding and coordination between donors will also be a challenge and for individual services such as GDNet, encouraging loyalty among users could become harder as the number of other online services compete for their attention.

4.   CONCLUSION

The development research agenda is dealing with pressing challenges worldwide: extreme poverty, inequality, climate change, urbanization, agriculture transformation and food security, among many others. Ultimately, enhancing the ability for all to research, debate and challenge

potential solutions regardless of their geographical location is what will make the difference in the pursuit of better research, better policy, and a better world. Creating spaces that bring researchers from different disciplines and countries together to exchange knowledge and make connections, will always be a key part of the solution.

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