



Independent Evaluation of the Global Diet and Activity Research Group and Network (GDAR)

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Executive summary

This report presents the findings from the independent formative evaluation of the Global Diet and Activity Research Group and Network (GDAR), conducted between February and July 2020 by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). GDAR is a research network consisting of partner institutions in Cameroon, the Caribbean, Kenya, South Africa and the UK. It is funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) over a period of three years (between June 2017 and June 2020).

Evaluation aims

The overall aim of this formative evaluation is to provide a critical independent review of the GDAR network. As stated in the Terms of References (TOR) the evaluation set out to explore views and experiences on what has worked well and what could have worked better in the newly formed network. To achieve this the evaluation team focused on two aspects: Network connectivity and network health.

The evaluation intends to support network members' own strategic learning and knowledge creation on how to build, support and maintain an effective research network, rather than providing an evaluation for accountability purposes or to assess the outcomes of the network.

Methods

The evaluation team employed a mixed methods approach, that involved four major steps:

Step 1: Review of GDAR network material and reports

Step 2: In-depth interviews of 17 core GDAR members (10 from the Southern partners /7 from Cambridge)

Step 3: Online survey to all GDAR members (n=36 responses)

Step 4: Integrated mixed methods analysis

Findings and recommendations

1. Assessment of the GDAR Funding and Partnership Model

The GDAR network has been funded by a NIHR Global Health Research Group award. This award aims to promote and support equitable North-South research partnerships and networks. Equitable partnering was not an easy task for GDAR given that the NIHR funding and partnership model mandated a Northern-led partnership which devolved the responsibility for financial and research management to the Cambridge Unit. This created some unavoidable power imbalances in the network. However, most GDAR members did not automatically perceive these imbalances as negative and many felt that a strong centrally located leadership may have helped in the initial stages of the network creation. The Cambridge management team also employed a variety of structures and practices to reduce power imbalances. Nevertheless, a more equal power distribution across Northern and Southern GDAR members was desired by many members for the next stages of GDAR.

Depending on the requirements of the funder/funding sources for the next stages of GDAR (once the current NIHR grant has finished) the partnership and funding model may or may not change. In case the future funder insists on a Northern-led partnership, the following practical approaches have

been used by other North-South networks to address power dynamics and facilitate more equitable partnership (plus of course all of the measures and structures that are currently in place):

- **Locate a project manager in some or all Southern partner institutions.** These managers can act as the hub for communication and research management in their institution/their country and can function as a counterpart for the project manager in Cambridge.
- **Job-share the project management role between the Northern institution and one of the Southern partners.** Some international research networks (usually networks in which there were already strong pre-existing partnerships between at least some of the partners prior to the start of the network) created a part-time network coordinator position in the UK and in one of the Southern partner – thus creating an international job share (UK Collaborative on Development Sciences 2017).
- **Rotation of the network management position across all partner institution.** The evaluation team is not convinced that this would be an attractive option for GDAR as it will make it challenging to generate consistency given the frequent changes. Furthermore, in some partner countries recruitment of a manager with the required skill set may be challenging (as suggested by the challenges some countries experienced when attempting to recruit finance and admin support staff).
- **Budget distribution via a Southern partner rather than the Northern lead.** Some research consortia with African partners used a model whereby the Northern lead institution transfers all the budget for the African partners to one of the African institutions. This institution then takes the responsibility for distributing the funds (either based on budget forecasts from each partner or based on need). It should also be mention that some African institutions are uncomfortable with having large amounts of money in their bank accounts and thus prefer smaller payments (e.g. based on deliverable). Whether this model may be an option for GDAR depends of course on the legal regulation in the contract with NIHR (which is a UK government agency and thus may object) and whether there is sufficient financial capacity in one of the Southern partners.

In case the next funder is more flexible with regards to the partnership and funding model for GDAR alternative management structures could be considered. For example, a joint model in which leadership and funding is split between Northern and Southern partners. Another option would be to co-fund the GDAR network via multiple funding streams and accountability arrangements.

2. Assessment of Network connectivity: Substantial amount of connectivity but a need for more South-to-South connections

The evaluation found a substantial amount of connectivity between GDAR members, although bilateral North-South connections were usually stronger and more frequent than South-South connections. There are several explanations for this including strong pre-existing ties between individual researchers; the centralized structure of the network with Cambridge at the center, lack of capacity and funds for wider relationship building within the network; and a lack of motivation and incentives to pursue South-South connections as North-South ties are likely to be of greater benefits to Southern partners (e.g. with regards to access to funding opportunities, chances to publish in high-quality journals and prestige). Nevertheless, there was a strong desire to build stronger South-South connections within GDAR. Based on the learning from the evaluation, the following strategies could help to strengthen South-South connectivity within GDAR:

- **Promote South-South collaboration** with dedicated budget lines to facilitate relationship building and joined project, Southern-led seminar/webinar series, funding for exchange visits/sabbaticals for researchers from Southern countries to other Southern countries.
- **Identify and apply for funding sources for Southern-led research projects/programmes** within GDAR. Consider funders based in Southern partner countries (e.g. South Africa), private sector funders (e.g. International Banks such as HSBC¹), Foundations, and Northern public funding institutions that directly fund to LMIC institutions (such as IDRC or Wellcome Trust).
- **Acknowledge the obstacles and bottlenecks to South-South collaboration** (e.g. less incentives for Southern partners than for North-South collaborations) and develop strategies to overcome them within the GDAR network (see also Osama 2008).

There is a tentative plan to expand GDAR to include additional Southern partners. This would increase opportunities for cross-country analysis but could also loosen newly established connections within the network (e.g. because less resources to connect are available).

- **Make efforts to support and keep the network connected**, especially if GDAR expands and/or the central leaders (i.e. Nick Wareham and Tolu Oni) slowly withdraw their bounding and bridging influences. Networks have been shown to come to an end if they are fragmented too much.

Given that GDAR aims to take a novel and interdisciplinary approach to the prevention of NCDs, there is a need to further diversify the network and also to intensify efforts to bridging between disciplines.

- **Raise awareness of the value of different disciplines** in addressing common questions (e.g. through a seminar series), recruit disciplinary counterparts in Southern partners countries and involve researchers from other disciplines from the outside (e.g. wider University not just the MRC Unit).

Steering committee meetings and Work packages were identified as the two key structures for network connectivity.

While overall satisfaction with the **Steering committee meetings** was high, many felt that the meetings lacked opportunities and time for constructive research discussions and ‘true’ bonding and bridging between network members.

- **Consider changing the format of the Network Steering committee** meetings to facilitate more and longer discussions of research. For example, every second Steering committee meeting could be a pure research meeting with a limited number of agenda items to allow sufficient time for discussions.

The rotating chair for the steering committee was appreciated, but many perceived it as ‘more of a technical thing’ and less effective in ensuring that each partner had a proportional voice in the

¹ American Express; HSBC are new research funders for IDS (without the ‘typical strings’ of other private sector funders).

meetings. This impression was further strengthened by the fact that the agenda for the meeting was usually developed by the Cambridge team (although initially the two chairs discussed and agreed upon the agenda in a short pre-meeting).

- **Consider more Southern-leadership and management of Steering committee meetings.**

Work Packages were described as the space where most learning and capacity building in GDAR occurred. Bridging between WPs was very limited and seen as an important shortcoming by many. Lack of time and resources and doubts about whether it was even possible/useful were common barriers to more cross-WPs connectivity. During the last GDAR workshop the lack of thematic grouping and naming of WPs was raised as an issue. Renaming and grouping could be one part of the processes for building connectivity.

- **Provide additional resources, capacity and leadership for active bridging between WPs.**

2. Assessment of Network Health: GDAR is a healthy network, but there is room for improvement

The evaluation found that high levels of overall satisfaction with the GDAR network with most members perceiving the network to be (unusually) participatory and equitable for a North-South collaboration. There was evidence that many of the typical success factors for an effective North-South network were present including transparent decision-making processes, fair governance arrangement and a facilitative leadership. Similarly, GDAR was able to address many of the common root causes for conflicts in research collaboration early on including unequal development of research agendas, lack of clarity regarding authorship of academic publications and lack of long-term commitment.

Nevertheless, some areas that could be improved were identified. Firstly, while all partners praised the financial capacity building that had taken place in GDAR, capacity building in other areas received mixed feedback.

- **Strengthen capacity building in GDAR** and consider various avenues such as active learning during meetings, Southern-led capacity building, South-South exchange of researchers.
- **Look for additional funding for capacity building efforts** as many funders (including NIHR) don't allow budget lines for dedicated, long-term capacity building (e.g.: www.ukcdr.org.uk/about-us/our-groups/research-capacity-strengthening-group/joint-uk-funding-of-research-capacity-strengthening-initiatives/).
- **Consider North-South, South-South and also (!) South-North mentorship** and coaching schemes between GDAR researchers.

GDAR needs to identify its unique niche and find a shared vision that unites all WPs in the network. This will also help to ensure long-term sustainability of GDAR, increase the network's visibility, attract new funding and strengthen its capacity to effectively influence policy.

- Allocate some of the remaining NIHR funding to **jointly work on a shared vision for the GDAR network**. Remember 'The whole is greater than the sum of its parts'.

- **Develop a communication strategy to communicate this vision** in an accessible manner to various audiences and potential funders (e.g. blogs, journal paper, video, virtual stakeholder events in each partner country).

4. Need to strengthen policy influence in country

The research output of GDAR has been limited until now because of many understandable reasons (e.g. delay in data collection, COVID lock-down). To increase the visibility of GDAR and raise its profile, outputs are essential. While journal papers are an important output for the research network, they rarely suffice to achieve influence on policy or practice, neither at the country or the global level. To ensure that GDAR network outputs effectively influence policy, an urgent need for more ongoing engagement with relevant stakeholders in country was highlighted by several Southern researchers, especially as there are many competing priorities in Southern countries, limited capacities and budgets, and constant shifts of the political and policy landscapes.

- To maximise outreach and impact consider **connecting with other significant regional partnerships** (e.g. AMREF, UN networks, NGO networks).
- **Integrate research up-take activities at every stage of the research process** in each country as this has been shown to be a key factor for policy impact in country.