Independent Evaluation of GDARSpaces

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings of an independent evaluation of the GDARSpaces research network. The evaluation was led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). GDARSpaces is a multi-country collaboration funded by the UK National Institute for Health Research (NIHR), bringing together research institutions from Brazil, Jamaica, Cameroon, Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria and the UK, with the shared goal of generating high quality, novel and policy relevant research to inform resilient and equitable urban diet and physical activity (PA) interventions arising from risks associated with urbanization and climate change, particularly in urban areas in low- and middle-income country (LMIC) settings. The evaluation focused on how well GDARSpaces functions as an equitable, connected, and impactful research partnership. It explored three core areas:

1. **Network health** – the internal functioning of the network, including communication, participation, leadership, and trust.
2. **Network connectivity** – the strength and quality of relationships and collaboration across sites and teams.
3. **Network outcomes** – the network's influence on policy, civil society engagement, and capacity development.

Approach and methodology

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach to understand how GDARSpaces functions as a research network and how it contributes to change. It was guided by GDARSpaces' Theory of Change (ToC) and used Outcome Mapping to assess GDARSpaces' influence on policy, civil society, and research capacity. This involved tracking changes in behaviour, relationships and engagement across key partners.

Four main tools were used for data collection:

- Qualitative interviews with 14 GDARSpaces members across all partner institutions
- Online surveys open to all members (n=36).
- A shared spreadsheet where country teams recorded real-time examples of change linked to the network's goals.
- An open final reflection opportunity.

Data from all sources were analysed together to build a well-rounded picture of how the network operated, how it added value, and where further strengthening is needed (or what lessons can be learned for future North-South research networks). The evaluation findings were shared and validated through participatory discussions with GDARSpaces members on several occasions throughout the process.

Summary of Findings:

1. Network health & connectivity in GDARSpaces

The GDARSpaces network has evolved into a strong, values-driven partnership that supports cross-country collaboration, professional growth, and mutual learning. The evaluation found strong appreciation among members for the network's inclusivity, relational strength, and opportunities for engagement. At the same time, some challenges related to equity, communication, and structural imbalances persist.

- **Professional growth and collaboration:** Members highlighted how GDARSpaces provided opportunities to grow as researchers, project leads, and collaborators. The network supported capacity strengthening through both formal training and informal peer learning. GDARSpaces was often described as a space of mutual respect, trust, and shared learning. These "soft values" are essential to healthy and productive research networks but are often overlooked in traditional evaluations.

- **Cross-country cooperation:** The network was praised for facilitating meaningful South–South and South–North research collaboration. Over 85% of survey respondents agreed that GDARSpaces had been effective in fostering cross-country research and cooperation.

- **Network maturity improved connectivity:** GDARSpaces has matured significantly over the 8 years since its early stages as GDAR. Members noted improved communication, stronger relationships, and a clearer shared purpose. This growing comfort among partners helped build trust and made collaboration more fluid and inclusive.

- **Vision and leadership:** The PI's (Tolu) founding vision for GDARSpaces was seen as crucial to its growth. The Network Steering Group (NSG) played a central role in guiding decision-making, supporting coordination, and fostering a shared identity. Most members viewed the NSG as effective in promoting inclusive governance and maintaining the values of the network.

- **Power and leadership:** While deliberate steps were taken to decentralise leadership—such as appointing country co-leads, rotating meeting chairs, and encouraging Southern leadership of work packages, some partners still perceived Cambridge as the dominant site. Although many appreciated Cambridge's coordination role, others expressed a need for more transparency, particularly around leadership transitions. However, this would have required the release of private information.

- **Communication:** Overall, communication within the network was effective, with 80% of survey respondents reporting satisfaction. However, partners highlighted issues such as rushed meetings, uneven participation (often dominated by a few voices), and a lack of clarity during staff and leadership changes, which undermined trust and inclusiveness.

- **Structural inequities:** Some partners in Southern institutions faced greater administrative burdens and often lacked the support staff available at the central hub. This created imbalances in workload and participation. These issues were not due to intent but reflected deeper systemic inequalities between institutions.

- **Authorship:** Despite authorship guidelines, tensions persisted. Some contributors felt that co-authorship was not always distributed fairly, reflecting some (if significantly reduced) lingering power imbalances.

- **Progress and limitations:** Most network members acknowledged that GDARSpaces had made genuine progress toward equity compared to earlier phases. However, persistent structural barriers—such as capacity gaps and administrative strain—continued to affect perceptions of fairness and full participation.

GDARSpaces has made strong progress in building an inclusive, well-connected research network. Its strength lies in shared values, mutual respect, and growing trust. To deepen equity, the network will

need to continue addressing some of the persisting power asymmetries, improve transparency, and support equitable participation across all sites.

Recommendations to promote network health and connectivity in equitable North-South research networks:

1. **Invest early and proactively in administrative capacities for Southern partners** to address structural inequities that often undermine equitable research collaboration. This includes funding dedicated administrative staff, financial management systems, and grant compliance support within Southern institutions from the outset of a project.
   Such investment not only enables smoother project delivery but also allows Southern partners to manage their own budgets, take on co-leadership roles, and engage as equal institutional players.
   Initiatives like the Partnerships for Enhanced Engagement in Research (PEER) and Equity in International Research Partnerships (UKCDR) stress that early administrative support is as important as research funding and recommend earmarked budget lines and joint grant management training as part of proposal planning.

2. **Build in mechanisms to acknowledge and respond to local disruptions—such as natural disasters, political unrest, public health emergencies or any other major disruptions**—so that all network members (including both Northern and Southern partners) can log and report these challenges. This fosters trust, transparency, and realism in project planning and timelines. The UKCDR's Equitable Partnerships principles recommend including flexible timelines, "pause clauses," and regular context check-ins in grant agreements. These allow for adaptive planning and ensure Southern partners are not unfairly disadvantaged by context-specific constraints.

3. **Promote two-way learning on administrative systems** by creating regular spaces for staff from both Northern and Southern institutions to share experiences and best practices. This helps build mutual understanding of operational realities and avoids the assumption that Northern systems can simply be transferred or imposed.
   Programmes like ESSENCE on Health Research and CARTA highlight the value of joint learning workshops, peer exchange visits, and collaborative troubleshooting as ways to strengthen admin capacity while respecting local contexts and institutional diversity.

4. **Balance transparency with respect for privacy during leadership or administrative transitions.** Ensure timely and clear communication about any leadership or structural changes, including plans to minimise disruption, to prevent confusion, avoid reinforcing historical power hierarchies, and maintain trust. Evidence from networks such as REACH and H3Africa highlights that openness around staffing and governance changes—accompanied by clear timelines, rationales, and opportunities for input—can strengthen equity and shared ownership across partnerships.
   At the same time, transparency has limits: not all details can be shared, especially when changes relate to people's personal circumstances. In these cases, the focus should be on communicating what is changing, why continuity matters, and how transitions will be managed, rather than on disclosing private information. Striking this balance helps maintain trust while respecting individuals' confidentiality.

5. **Fully commit to shared leadership, e.g. of work packages and provide the necessary logistical and financial support** to enable Southern partners to take on these roles meaningfully and sustainably.

6. **Use regular participatory equity reviews to assess fairness and inclusion across the** network and to understand perceptions of equity in leadership, authorship, and decision-making.
Go beyond written policies—create a small rotating authorship equity group to review draft author lists and flag concerns before submission. This promotes transparency, builds trust, and supports ongoing reflection on power dynamics.

7. **Strengthen inclusive and efficient virtual meeting facilitation** by developing simple guidance or offering light-touch training—particularly for multicultural and multilingual settings. Encourage inclusive practices such as using clear language, rotating chairs, inviting quieter voices, and offering multiple ways to contribute (e.g. chat, follow-up notes). Collaborations like ARISE and Transforming Nutrition (both co-led by IDS) have shown that inclusive facilitation improves engagement, shared ownership, and decision-making across geographically dispersed teams.

2. GDARSpaces Outcome

Pathway 1: Bridging Research and Policy

GDARSpaces has made encouraging progress in building connections between research and policy, although this pathway remains in early stages and impact is still emerging. All country teams produced high-quality research outputs, including policy-relevant briefs, and increasingly engaged with national and local policymakers—especially from 2024 onwards.

- **National government engagement** grew gradually in several countries. Ministries began attending and actively engaging in validation workshops, requesting briefings, and showing interest in GDARSpaces research on urban resilience and healthy environments. These engagements helped to slowly start to position GDARSpaces as a credible and trusted actor, though progress is uneven across sites.

- **At the local level,** engagement was more visible by 2025, with notable examples in Brazil, South Africa, and Cameroon. Teams used multimedia tools, stakeholder consultations, and tailored presentations to communicate findings effectively. However, local engagement also faced barriers, including staff turnover, limited incentives for early-career researchers, and inconsistent documentation of informal interactions. Despite these challenges, GDARSpaces created a strong foundation for future policy influence by fostering trusted relationships, co-producing knowledge with stakeholders, and using inclusive formats. Sustained engagement beyond the funding period—through informal updates, strategic follow-up, and reuse of existing outputs—could offers a low-cost way to maintain momentum and deepen policy impact over time.

Recommendations for strengthening policy influence

1. **Develop local focal points or liaison roles**

Designate or train staff within each team to act as a consistent point of contact for local authorities. This helps maintain relationships across staff transitions and signals long-term commitment.

2. **Institutionalize documentation tools**

   Create lightweight but systematic ways to record all policy interactions—formal and informal. This could include a shared log or app-based tracker.

3. **Support ECRs to engage locally**

   Provide formal recognition or small funding schemes to encourage ECRs to contribute to local engagement activities without compromising academic progression.

4. **Leverage local multimedia for policy translation**

   Follow the example of Belo Horizonte by producing short videos, infographics, or briefing documents tailored to local decision-makers' time and information needs.

5. **Align incentives with policy impact**
   Consider internal recognition or credit systems that reward ECRs and senior researchers for meaningful policy engagement. Collaborations with academic institutions to formally recognize such contributions in promotion pathways would be a valuable long-term goal.

Pathway 2: Bridging Research and Civil Society

During the GDARSpaces funding period, the network made some valuable progress in engaging civil society actors—particularly Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), and community-based organisations. However, the level and consistency of engagement varied significantly across countries, and in many cases remained modest or in early stages. Much of the documented engagement was planned or emerging, rather than systematically embedded in research processes from the outset.

The survey findings reflected this mixed picture. While nearly half (46%) of respondents observed an increase in civil society engagement around GDARSpaces-related themes, over half (57%) felt that the network itself had contributed only "a little" or "not at all" to that increase. This suggests that while civil society engagement may be growing, GDARSpaces was not always the driver or facilitator of this change.

Where engagement did happen, it was often valuable. In Cameroon and Jamaica, community actors contributed meaningfully to research discussions and helped ensure findings were grounded in local realities. In Brazil, short videos were produced to make urban health research more accessible to local audiences. Across several sites, stakeholder workshops allowed for dialogue with civil society partners, and team members spoke positively about how community input enriched their understanding and helped shape their work. These moments of interaction helped bridge the gap between academic research and everyday experience, even if they remained limited in scale.

In contrast, there was no evidence of engagement with private sector actors during the GDARSpaces funding period. While the private sector undoubtedly plays an important role in shaping food environments, physical activity patterns, and access to health-promoting infrastructure, collaboration in this space carries significant risks. Several GDAR partners expressed strong reluctance to engage, pointing to concerns about conflicts of interest, reputational risks, and the possibility that partnerships could be used by companies to legitimise practices that undermine public health. There was also a concern that private sector engagement might reinforce existing inequities by privileging powerful commercial actors over community or public health priorities.

This absence of engagement therefore reflects not only a missed opportunity but also a deliberate decision by some partners to protect the independence, credibility, and equity principles of GDARSpaces. Future phases may wish to revisit this question, but any consideration of private sector engagement would need to be guided by clear principles and safeguards to ensure that public health objectives and equity remain paramount.

Recommendations for strengthening influence on civil society

1. With Civil Society:

- **Map and maintain relationships** with local civil society organisations and use accessible platforms (e.g. WhatsApp or community centers) to share updates.
- **Translate research outputs into local languages and formats** such as videos or infographics, and consider co-branding with civil society partners to strengthen shared ownership.
- **Involve civil society actors early in the research cycle**—during design, tool development, and validation—to ensure relevance and foster long-term collaboration.

2. With the Private Sector:

- **Identify key private sector actors**—such as food vendors, urban planners, or digital health companies—who influence local environments.
- **Begin with informal conversations or roundtables** to understand priorities and explore common ground.
- **Develop clear guidelines for private sector engagement** to ensure alignment with public health values, agree on rules of engagement and publicity and avoid conflicts of interest.

Pathway 3: Supporting Individual Capacity for Transdisciplinary Research and Global Collaboration

One of GDARSpaces' strongest and most appreciated achievements was its support for Early Career Researchers (ECRs). Across all data sources, ECR development emerged as a lasting legacy of the network. Rather than being an add-on, capacity strengthening was built into the network's core, with ECRs actively involved in research leadership, analysis, writing, and cross-site learning. Many described the experience as transformative—offering mentorship, peer support, and opportunities to grow professionally in ways that are rarely possible in short-term projects. Survey data and progress reporting show a clear increase in ECR involvement over time, with digital workshops, online learning exchanges, and international collaborations broadening access, especially in countries with limited local resources. Several individuals, including mentors like Alafia and Feyi, played key roles in supporting ECRs' confidence, leadership, and visibility. Overall, GDARSpaces fostered not only technical skills but also the trust, continuity, and encouragement needed for future research leaders to thrive.

Recommendations to strengthen individual capacity

1. **Sustain ECR involvement** by securing resources for mentorship, exchange, and research leadership roles beyond the funding cycle.

2. **Document ECR contributions systematically** (e.g. co-authorship, project leadership) to strengthen institutional recognition and career progression.

3. **Encourage cross-site peer learning and online capacity-sharing** formats to ensure inclusive access across diverse settings.

Pathway 4: Strengthening institutional capacity

GDARSpaces made important contributions in building institutional—rather than just individual—capacity to lead and participate in transdisciplinary and global health research. Survey responses showed that nearly 70% of members saw improvements in their institutions' ability to conduct transdisciplinary research and engage in global partnerships, and most attributed these gains directly to GDARSpaces. Across countries, institutions reported becoming more confident in managing research protocols, using innovative methods, training staff internally, handling complex grants, and gaining national and international visibility. Examples included more Southern-led publications, South–South collaborations, and wider dissemination of research through institutional platforms. These changes suggest that GDARSpaces helped partners move from being research implementers to more equal contributors and leaders in global research efforts. This aligns with wider evidence that sustainable North–South partnerships must invest in institutional systems—not just individual skills.

Key recommendations for institutional capacity strengthening

1. **Promote partner institutions' visibility** through co-branding, authorship, local dissemination, and funded representation at international events.

2. **Use tools like progress markers to track and celebrate institutional achievements** beyond individual researcher development.