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Mapping to Transform

National Research Systems as the Horizon of Action

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National Research Systems as the Horizon of Action.

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Abstract

The collaboration between the Global Development Network (GDN) and Expertise France (EF) as part of the Savoirs Eco project (2023–2026), funded by the European Union, is based on the principle that supporting the ecosystem of social and economic science research cannot be provided without a detailed understanding of the research system as a whole.

The global initiative Doing Research views the national research ecosystem as the scope of its work, with a view to improving interactions between researchers and public policy-makers. Tunisia is the first country in the MENA region to be included in the global initiative. The collaboration between GDN and EF demonstrates the value of investing in a detailed understanding of the research ecosystem, in Tunisia and elsewhere, in order to develop context-specific, feasible capacity-building interventions that deliver a real impact.

In a rapidly changing world where transitions are accelerating, the need for decision-makers to rely on reliable knowledge and to foster evidence-based public debate has never been greater, whilst the legitimacy of science is regularly called into question.

Résumé

La collaboration entre le Global Development Network (GDN) et Expertise France (EF) dans le cadre du projet Savoirs Eco (2023–2026), financé par l'Union européenne, part du principe qu'un soutien adapté à l'écosystème de la production et de la diffusion en sciences sociales et économiques ne peut se faire sans une connaissance fine du système de recherche dans sa globalité.

L'initiative globale Doing Research considère l'écosystème national de recherche comme l'horizon de l'action, afin d'améliorer les interactions entre chercheurs et acteurs des politiques publiques. La Tunisie est le premier pays de la région MENA à être inclus dans l'initiative globale. La collaboration entre GDN et EF témoigne de l'intérêt d'un investissement dans la compréhension fine de l'écosystème de la recherche, en Tunisie et ailleurs, pour préparer des interventions de renforcement de capacités spécifiques au contexte, faisables, et avec un impact réel.

Dans un monde en recomposition où les transitions s'accélèrent, les besoins de s'appuyer sur des connaissances fiables pour les décideurs et pour favoriser un débat public fondé sur des données probantes n'ont jamais été aussi importants, tandis que la légitimité de la science est quant à elle régulièrement remise en question.

Keywords

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Key Facts

- As part of the “Savoirs Eco” project in Tunisia, the DRA was proposed as the main activity supporting the MESRS. The DRA provides a analysis of the social science research system, without which no appropriate transformation of the system is possible.
- Effective support for social science research systems requires an integrated approach combining knowledge production, capacity building, funding, networking, and dialogue with public decision-makers.
- The combination of Expertise France’s institutional and operational anchoring and GDN’s methodological expertise in research capacity strengthening and comparative analysis of research systems constitutes a particularly relevant complementarity.
- This experience could be extended through a regional initiative aimed at supporting knowledge-producing structures in the social and economic sciences in the countries of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf through an approach combining the four levels of intervention of research systems (individual, institution, national system, and regional ecosystem).

1. The Global Development Network and the Global Doing Research Initiative (DRA)

Launched in 2014, the global Doing Research initiative is one of the flagship programs of the Global Development Network (GDN), an international public organization that supports high-quality, policy-oriented social science research in low- and middle-income countries. It is a globally framed but locally led reflection conducted by social science specialists on the social sciences themselves, with the aim of identifying systemic obstacles, opportunities, and levers for change in the countries concerned. To date, 22 preliminary or complementary studies and 14 DRAs have been conducted in 29 countries across Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Pacific, with two regional expansions currently underway or recently completed in Africa (Benin, Cameroon, Mali, Chad) and Asia/Pacific (Cambodia, Fiji, India, Laos). Tunisia is the first country in the MENA region to be included in the global Doing Research initiative, and the collaboration between EF and GDN is key to extending the initiative to other countries in the region.

In very brief terms, the DRA is an exercise based on three stages – context analysis, stakeholder mapping, and primary data collection – organized around 54 indicators focused on the production, dissemination, and uptake of research. The survey, built from a stratified representative sample, is based on a dialogue between qualitative and quantitative data, primary and secondary sources, and on an intellectual and scientific partnership between national teams selected to conduct the research and adapt the methodology to local realities, and the GDN team. The outputs are not limited to a report and presentations, but also include the primary data generated by the study, intended for use by the scientific community, and above all debates and dialogue with decision-makers to foster local ownership of the findings.

In Tunisia this study, which focuses on the analysis of the economic, historical, political, and social context of research, provides a mapping of stakeholders and presents the results of a survey conducted among more than five hundred researchers, research administrators, and policy-makers. It highlights the extent to which the research ecosystem in Tunisia is both rich and fragmented, with public universities remaining the main actors and the “Greater Tunis” metropolitan area continuing to host most research institutions. The social sciences are confronted with sometimes contradictory tensions: brain drain, particularly towards Gulf countries, especially in economics, and the tendency to publish in English on the one hand, and on the other hand a trend and willingness to “re-anchor” research locally, in Arabic, relying on actors active in the dissemination and communication of research findings (think tanks, media, advocacy CSOs) in order to make knowledge accessible to the public and society.

2. Brief Overview of Project Results and Dissemination Strategies

The Doing Research Assessment (DRA) study in Tunisia (2025) showed the extent to which the ecosystem is made more dynamic by younger generations, remains heavily concentrated in “Greater Tunis,” and is constrained by limited funding and insufficient integration with the political sphere and society. Research in Tunisia is also developing outside universities, but the visibility of this ecosystem remains marginal.

The researcher population is very young and predominantly female. At the national level, the social sciences account for 45% of student enrolments, but only 22% of senior researchers (Category A).[1] The disciplinary orientation is narrow: management and economics dominate, while other social sciences (sociology, anthropology, etc.) remain underfunded and marginalized.

Public investment in research remains limited: approximately 1.34% of GDP and 4% of the state budget in 2023. The share of funds directly allocated to scientific research declined from 11% (2009) to 8.5% (2023) of the relevant ministry’s budget.

Regarding research production, there has been an increase in the number of publications and young researchers, but this has been accompanied by a perceived lack of training and career opportunities. Tunisia produces between 1,500 and 2,000 doctorates each year, reflecting strong academic vitality but also a risk of massification and declining quality of supervision. New PhD graduates often feel poorly prepared for a research career and lack mentoring and technical skills, particularly in project design and management. Only 27% of researchers consider career prospects attractive; 44% did not respond, revealing low morale and uncertainty regarding career development.

Only 10.8% of researchers acknowledge the existence of a national governance structure for social science research; moreover, 61% of respondents did not answer the survey question on governance. These figures suggest a profound disconnect between governance bodies and the research community. This reflects a fragmented ecosystem in which researchers often work in isolation, disconnected from institutional frameworks and support mechanisms.

In terms of research communication, the study highlights limited engagement with policy-making and the media: 85.8% of researchers have never contributed to policy-making. Sixty-nine percent report having no interaction with the media. Similarly, the science-policy interface is weakly institutionalized and relies more on personal networks than on structured mechanisms. Only 16.5% of researchers have directly contributed to policy-making, but around 50% state that their work is cited in official documents, particularly in economics and management.

Regarding recommendations, the study stresses that the major challenge remains strengthening the impact of research on public policies and responses to social challenges. Strengthening the social sciences requires better structuring of the science-policy nexus, expanding bridges between researchers, administrations, think tanks, and civil society, and transforming knowledge into capacity for action.

In line with a conception of research as a public good, the study and its various dissemination products are fully available online on the dedicated website, in the form of an executive summary and final report (available in three languages: English, Arabic, and French), recordings of the final conference and international launch webinar, as well as direct access to the survey data produced.

The dissemination strategy was complemented by a tour organized by the ASSF team with the support of EF and GDN representatives within Tunisian universities. The objective of the tour was to establish direct dialogue with universities and the Tunisian scientific community in order to inform them about the project, data accessibility, and discuss the recommendations. A new research unit composed of

CERES, the ASSF team, and the deans of the relevant faculties in Tunis and Sousse will be responsible for ensuring the concrete sustainability of the project by deepening discussions around several recommendations resulting from the DRA study. The unit will therefore be responsible for proposing institutional follow-up to the General Directorate for Scientific Research of the MESRS.

3. Assessment and Regional Perspectives: Towards an Integrated Intervention

The “Savoirs Eco” project experience illustrates the complementarity between EF and GDN interventions through organizational strengthening of research structures, improved access to scientific data and tools, and the development of platforms for the dissemination and popularization of knowledge fostering links between science and society. How can support mechanisms for social science research be designed to sustainably strengthen knowledge production systems while avoiding the adverse effects of international funding, which remains fragmented, donor-driven, and often disconnected from the realities of national systems? Within the framework of the “Savoirs Eco” project, the response was to deploy a DRA as the main activity supporting the MESRS by providing a systemic analysis of the social science research system and thereby developing detailed knowledge and understanding of the dynamics at work within this segment of the Tunisian academic field, without which no appropriate transformation is possible.

Building on the Tunisian experience, cooperation between Expertise France and the Global Development Network opens prospects for scaling up at the regional level across the MENA area. The lessons learned from the “Savoirs Eco” project and the Doing Research Assessment indeed show that effective support for social science research systems requires an integrated approach combining knowledge production, capacity building, funding, networking, and dialogue with public decision-makers. In contexts marked by fragmented research ecosystems, weak science-policy interfaces, and dependence on external funding, the combination of Expertise France’s institutional and operational anchoring and GDN’s methodological expertise in the comparative analysis of research systems constitutes a particularly relevant complementarity.

This momentum could be extended through a regional “Savoirs MENA” initiative aimed at supporting the ecosystem of knowledge-producing structures in the social and economic sciences in the countries of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf in order to foster both public policy dialogues informed by research and public debate on contemporary issues through the lens of the social sciences. Building on the methodologies developed by GDN and its expertise in supporting research and researchers in countries of the Global South, on the experience gained in Tunisia, and on the academic, institutional, and civil society networks mobilized by Expertise France, an EF-GDN partnership could thus contribute to structuring a Mediterranean space for research and the circulation of knowledge. This initiative would start from needs identified by national and regional stakeholders (public institutions, universities, think tanks) rather than agendas defined externally, relying on EF’s presence in the countries concerned and on the DRA methodology to anchor the intervention in the realities of each ecosystem.

To this end, EF is in a position to mobilize relevant French, European, and international partners and deploy a range of complementary instruments: research funding windows, capacity-building mechanisms for knowledge-producing structures, support for research networks, and dialogue mechanisms between researchers, public decision-makers, and intermediary actors. This approach makes it possible to move beyond a project-based logic towards structured support for systems of knowledge production and dissemination.

Such an approach is also aligned with the priorities promoted by the European Union with Southern Neighborhood countries, as demonstrated by the Pact for the Mediterranean published in 2025, which explicitly places cooperation in the fields of knowledge, research, and innovation at the heart of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, recognizing that the region’s shared challenges (economic, ecological, and social transitions, youth employment, mobility, food security, among others) cannot be addressed without robust national capacities for the production, dissemination, and use of knowledge. It is precisely at the intersection of regional challenges, European priorities, and national needs that the added value of an initiative such as “Savoirs MENA” lies.

Recommendations

- Sequence the mapping of the research system before launching capacity-building actions. Any program supporting research systems should conduct a DRA phase upstream of stakeholder strengthening activities, rather than in parallel.
- Formalize national institutional ownership from the outset. The gains generated by the DRA in the Tunisian case (data, recommendations, momentum for dialogue between the scientific community and public authorities) will not be sustained spontaneously. The institutions responsible for updating and using them in public policies must be identified from the start.
- Ensure that a significant share of capacity-building actions is dedicated to dissemination and use issues, in addition to activities supporting knowledge production.
- Extend this momentum through a regional “Savoirs MENA” initiative. Building on the Tunisian lessons learned, an EF-GDN partnership at the regional level would make it possible to support social science and economics research systems in the countries of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf by designing from the outset an integrated intervention cycle (mapping, capacity building, knowledge production and dissemination, policy dialogue) with sufficient duration and aligned with the priorities of the Pact for the Mediterranean and the orientations of the European Union.
- MENA countries should be prioritized because of their proximity to the European research area, but the initiative could extend beyond this region.

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ASSF	Applied Social Science Forum (research association, Tunis)
CERES	Centre for Economic and Social Studies and Research, Tunis
DRA	Doing Research Assessment (initiative globale Doing Research)
EF	Expertise France
GDN	Global Development Network
MENA	Middle East North Africa
MESRS	Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Tunis

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