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Financing without doing harm: for virtuous mechanisms to support african social science research

Policy Paper

Table des matières

Key messages	p. 4	3.	
Introduction	p. 5	An integrated service offer for the various research communities	p. 17
1.		Conclusions	p. 22
A mechanism to support African social science research: For what purpose?	p. 9	Bibliographic references	p. 23
2.			
An integrated mechanism to promote a holistic approach to the issues and challenges facing African research	p. 13		

Abstract: African research has scarcely begun to emerge at international level: Africa's overall share in global publications stands at about 3.5%, and the social sciences represent a tiny fraction of this figure.

While the international community recognizes the importance for each country of having a solid national research base anchored to public decision-making, and most African countries have pledged to devote 1% of their GDP to this sector, African research still remains underfunded. It is also dependent on international aid, which is hardly consistent with the principles of effectiveness and gives rise to a number of tensions. In light of this situation, this paper seeks to envision a "virtuous" mechanism to support African social science research "for development" (i.e., knowledge production designed to support, or that can be used for, the definition of public policies and development trajectories). This mechanism would be in the form of a platform covering various categories of activities which tend to have conflicting effects. It would aim to provide a coordinated and coherent response, with a focus on strengthening research systems. This platform would channel international financing and promote its strategic use in response to the needs of the various communities of research actors (beneficiaries, actors in financing, contributors to the international debate...).

It would have a compartment dedicated to financing research projects initiated and led by researchers, and programs to strengthen individual and institutional capacities, as well as the capacities of research systems. Based on a “holistic” approach, complementary services would be added to this financial compartment for knowledge production on the state of research, assistance in the design and implementation of support, expertise in evaluation, networking, and knowledge sharing.

Building on the principles of simplification, sustainability, subsidiarity towards national actors and the beneficiaries’ right of initiative, this mechanism would minimize risks of distortion. It would also contribute to raising the standards of the donor community. Consistent with the principles of aid harmonization, it would not seek to replace existing institutions, or add to the already abundant number of initiatives, but would aim to reduce the fragmentation, harmonize procedures, and improve the management of financing, in the interest of national research institutions and systems.

Key messages

- African research accounts for only a small proportion of global research, in terms of both publications (3.5%) and personnel (2.5%); the social sciences, which are essential for sharing the fruits of research for the benefit of societies, represent a tiny fraction.
 - African research is highly dependent on international financing, which causes tensions. A mechanism based on the results of the research on this issue and successful experiences in the field of financing would reduce such tensions and finance social science research without doing harm.
 - Around the principles of simplification, sustainability, subsidiarity and the beneficiaries' right of initiative, the various compartments of this mechanism would aim, in a consistent manner, to finance research production and capacity building, deepen knowledge of contexts, evaluate programs, and build networks among communities of actors.
 - This "single window" would harmonize procedures, reduce the fragmentation, and allow measures to be implemented – and on the right scale – geared to the beneficiaries, in particular national research institutions, whose interests would be central to its activities.
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Introduction

The international community recognizes the mobilization of science as a key factor for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and the development of a solid research base at national level as being essential for understanding local issues and challenges and their specific nature, proposing appropriate solutions, and informing the choices of decision-makers. In countries of the Global South, public and private international donors have made efforts to finance knowledge production for development and support the capacities of this sector. In most African countries, this financing has more or less broadly compensated for the lack of State financing, which is slow in getting off the ground despite the political commitments (as most African countries have pledged to devote 1% of their GDP to research and development, as recommended by the African Union). But it has also created a dependence and led to perverse effects, as shown by several research studies (see Box 1 below).

African actors involved in research bemoan the fact that the aid is fragmented, ineffective and lacks clarity, despite its importance for researchers, and that the bureaucratic red tape is a serious handicap. In turn, donors, who initiate individual or collective initiatives, underscore the need to deepen their knowledge and more effectively target, if not coordinate, their action. However, despite their commitments, exchanges within the international community remain limited, and feedback on the financial mechanisms and instruments set up is rarely shared, compiled, evaluated, or taken to scale. The effects of international support on local research systems remains an open issue.

In light of this situation, this paper seeks to envision what would be a “virtuous” mechanism to support African social science research, meaning a mechanism that reduces as far as possible the risks of distorting local research systems, while enabling a strategic use of international support for research on the continent. To this end, it draws on the institutional and professional experience of authors at Agence Française de Développement and the Global Development Network, as well as several recent research studies on the state of African

research and its financing, along with the results of a series of workshops organized by AFD involving various categories of actors concerned by this issue. This research highlights the challenges facing the sector and the sometimes contradictory implications (“tensions”) of donor operations, between financing research that is “useful” to their development mandates and strengthening research institutions and systems.

This paper thereby aims to make the link between the principles that need to be adopted to maximize the effectiveness of operations (or at least do no harm), the good practices to promote, and their operational translation into instruments and tools. Intended for various categories of actors (donors, researchers, intermediation institutions...), it aims to inspire concrete solutions to strengthen research in Africa and the effectiveness of development assistance in this sector, while drawing together the perspectives of these different communities.

Box 1. – Inherent tensions in financing for African research

An AFD policy paper¹ contributes to identifying the underlying tensions in international financing for African research, which are inherent to the “sometimes contradictory implications of the choices made” and the strategic objectives of the support financed. These tensions often lie in the existing power relations between actors involved in research and their financiers. As the latter wish to have “useful” research, they can take up a sponsor stance which is in contradiction with the principle of the independence of research, and risks turning researchers into “expert consultants”. More specifically, this can be seen in tensions between the different agendas of the donor and the research teams, in terms of the choice of themes and the research questions. But there are also tensions between the “methods” for conducting research: in terms of the methodology adopted, timeframes, publishing formats, and the possibility of using the results of the research free from donor “censorship”. Linguistic priorities (language of production and dissemination of the research) may also differ, depending on the objectives.

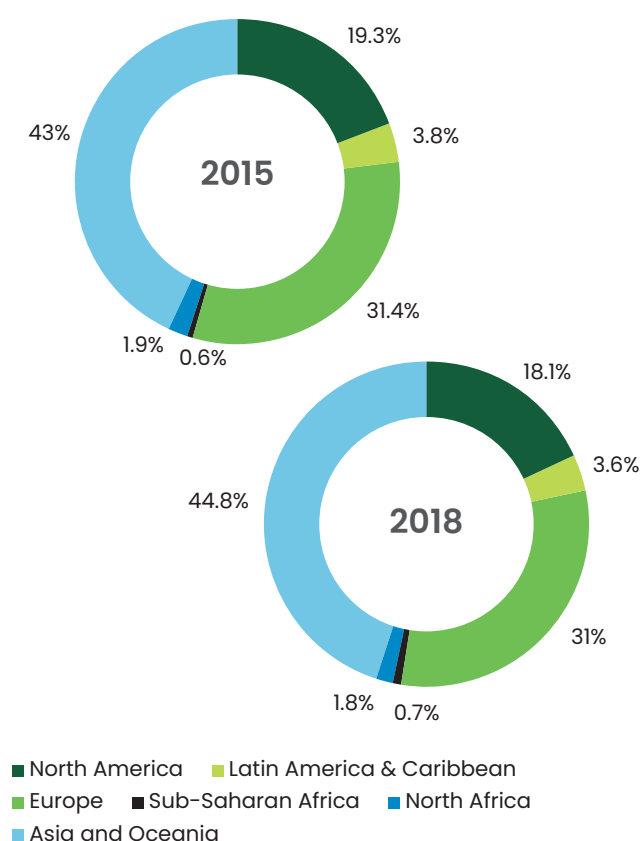
In addition, there are inherent tensions in the targeting and methods of support: as mentioned, financing in project mode can divert teams from their own and more long-term research agendas; the support for individual capacities can *de facto* weaken research institutions and systems; and recourse to contractual arrangements *via* research teams from “the North” for administrative reasons can effectively contribute to weakening the administrative capacities of the final beneficiary. In a context of limited resources, donors also need to make trade-offs in their allocation decisions: between support extended to a large number of beneficiaries (with a risk of spreading resources too thinly) and targeting a limited number of actors to trigger threshold effects; between targeting institutions of excellence, banking on their ability to raise the standard of the others, and strengthening the weakest actors; and between supporting institutional actors and “pure” research and supporting actors more connected to public debate (think tanks, “mission-focused” centers...).

¹ Botton, S. and R. D'Aiglepierre, 2020, Rethinking International Funding of African Research, AFD Éditions.

1. A mechanism to support African social science research: For what purpose?

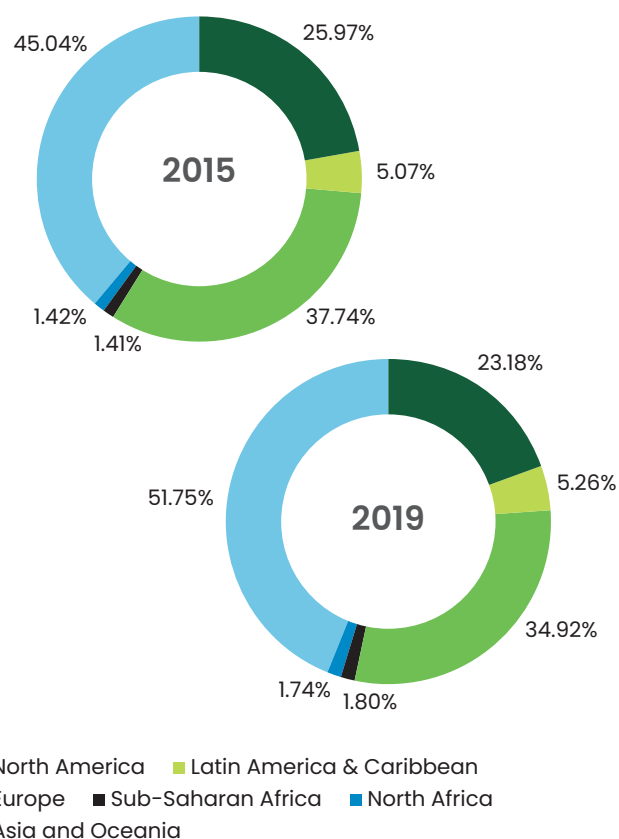
A new mechanism to support African social science research will need to be set up. Firstly, to support the development of the least-supported segment of global research and, secondly, to give the social sciences the means to play their full part in African sustainable development trajectories. Indeed, in terms of both scientific production and the research community, African research only represents a tiny fraction of global research. According to the UNESCO Science Report 2021, Sub-Saharan Africa's share in global publications only stood at 1.8% in 2019, against 1.4% five years earlier, and researchers on the continent only account for 0.7% of the global community.

Figure 1 – Share of global researchers by region, 2015 and 2018 (%)



Source: UNESCO Science Report 2021.

Figure 2 – Share of global scientific publications, 2015 and 2019 (%)²



Source: UNESCO Science Report 2021.

² N.B.: The sum of the regional values exceeds the global number because the articles with several authors from different regions are counted for each of these regions.

Furthermore, the social and human sciences, which are often not even counted in official statistics, represent the smallest fraction of these figures. While African research is gradually recovering from the drastic cuts experienced under the structural adjustment programs and the “dark years” marked by its deinstitutionalization, and is continuing to completely free itself from the colonial models from which it originates, it remains in a state of chronic underfunding, particularly in the social sciences.³ Yet, as the philosopher Felwine Sarr wrote in his book *Afrotopia*, the social sciences “have the primary role of contributing to a deep understanding of societal dynamics, without which no perspective for the positive transformation of African societies is possible.”⁴ When it comes to development, these disciplines are essential: they make it possible to “think” the social world and understand its mechanisms; through a more utilitarian approach, they contribute to an informed public debate and relevant public policies, including through a critical eye and evaluation; their interaction with technology, health sciences and hard sciences makes it possible to use the fruit of scientific innovations to serve the well-being of societies, and address the issue of incentives and the regulation of innovation in the broad sense. They play a key role in facilitating the connection between science, policy and society. Finally, local capacity for social science research is in itself a fundamental part of what we call sustainable development.

An innovative instrument, both ideal and realistic, building on the results of research, the “key principles” it has resulted in, and the various experiences of the institutions working in this sector therefore appears necessary to accelerate the emergence of African social science research and promote the effectiveness of international aid.

3 For example, in Nigeria, second in the ranking of African “producer” countries of social science research after South Africa, only 9% of gross domestic research and development expenditure goes to social science research (see Egbetokun *et al.*, 2020).

4 Sarr, F., 2016, *Afrotopia*, Philippe Rey.

2. An integrated mechanism to promote a holistic approach to the issues and challenges facing African research

Without replacing the many existing initiatives, this instrument would be in the form of a platform covering various categories of activities which tend to have conflicting effects. It would aim to provide a coordinated and coherent response to the needs defined by the various categories of actors involved in research on the continent, assist them in a collaborative process, and produce knowledge on the impact of these efforts. This platform would channel donors' financing and coordinate their operations, while offering them a much closer, more strategic and more balanced link with the contexts financed. It would promote a systemic approach, with a focus on strengthening research systems, irrespective of the level of intervention and the short-term targets of the financing it would attract. It would be a platform for shared learning for the donors who would provide financing through it, as well as for those who would provide direct financing. Through the learning it would enable, this mechanism would contribute to raising the standards followed by the entire donor community.

To promote this holistic approach, the platform (details of its "service offer" are provided in Section 3 below) should promote:

- **Knowledge of contexts**, to define the objectives and target the financing tools depending on needs and based on systematic, comparative, cumulative, shared and discusses analyses;
- **Support for research production**, through financing processes that foster researchers' right of initiative and highlight their own research agendas;
- **Capacity building for research**, at the level of individuals, institutions (academic or otherwise), and research policies and systems, with particular attention to the interaction between these three levels and possible tensions between the objectives;

- **Evaluation of research and the support it benefits from**, and the dissemination of a culture of evaluation;

- **Networking functions**, to share the information and knowledge produced and promote interactions between all the research stakeholders.

Building on the lessons learned from research conducted in this sector, this platform would be governed by four main principles:

- A **principle of sustainability**: these efforts would firstly aim to empower African actors involved in research so that they can define, implement and promote research agendas that contribute to "a deep understanding of societal dynamics" on the continent, including through public debate. This principle will guide the programming and evaluation of every initiative launched by the platform, which will thereby avoid creating any form of dependence, or at least minimize it;
- A **principle of "right of initiative"**, to support and assist initiatives led by the beneficiaries, in response to their requests and depending on the needs they have identified, counter the tendency of international donors to guide or at least prioritize the thematic areas of research, promote ownership, and guarantee the independence of researchers.⁵ This is applied through the freedom to establish the research agenda, and promote and use the results of research studies independently, including for the purpose of academic publications, by having intellectual property rights over them;
- A **principle of subsidiarity** towards other actors in the sector, such as national research agencies and universities for the implementation of specific services, to offer these actors additional financing, based on the needs they express, to support their activities, while promoting alignment. The platform will not seek to replace existing institutions, even periodically. For example, it would not provide a training service for research, but could finance or set up summer schools, training for administrative staff and research program managers, etc.;

⁵ Which is not in contradiction with the promotion, where relevant, of specific objectives in terms of sustainable development, for example, through incentives to reduce inequalities, particularly gender inequalities, promote innovation or multidisciplinary, etc.

- A **principle of simplification**, to avoid the proliferation of conditions, constraints and processes imposed on the beneficiaries which give rise to often prohibitive transaction costs (including for donors...), without lessening the current diversity and wealth of the sector.

This “platform” would therefore be intended for various research communities:

- The “users”, direct and indirect beneficiaries of the financing and capacity building activities: researchers and research institutions of the Global South and North, think tanks, ministries (including those which have supervisory authority over the research institutions), users of the results of research (including national decision-makers)...;
- Actors in financing, in particular those which can provide support in terms of financial solutions: bilateral and multilateral donors and their dialogue platforms, NGOs, foundations, national actors, such as national research agencies...;
- Actors (in particular researchers) who feed into the international debate on African research, who would use or contribute to knowledge production in this area.

3. An integrated service offer for the various research communities

The platform's operations would be coordinated around a strategic service offer meeting the needs of these different communities.

A. The central component of the instrument would be a strong management capacity for the design and implementation of financing windows for research projects and capacity building. It would thereby support high-quality, independent knowledge production in support of local development policies. This "financial compartment" of the mechanism would firstly comprise financing for thematic research programs and, secondly, financing windows for institutions, specific segments of the research community (young researchers, researchers interested in the societal impact...), and African research networks. Its distinctive feature would be its capacity to provide donors with a set of skills to manage a wide range of financing instruments. For example, the main services would comprise the management of delegated funds, the development of financial engineering, and consultancy services. In addition to promoting the independence of research and avoiding a "subscription-based model", the management of these different services by a specialized organization should accelerate and centralize learning on their effectiveness. The platform would function as a structuring hub in a currently multifaceted landscape of financing initiatives: as mentioned above, it would neither replace nor lessen the current diversity and wealth of the sector, but would be a center of expertise and collaboration, drawing upon existing experiences and pooling learning and expertise.

To support this financing function, the platform would structure a range of services providing strategic and operational support to address the challenges related to the production, dissemination and use of research, including capacity building in terms of requesting and managing international financing. These services will need to include:

Inspiring initiative # 1 – "Research in the Global South" program of the Clermont International Development Hub

Between 2022 and 2023, the "Research in the Global South" program, led by the Global Development Network (GDN) at the Clermont International Development Hub (PCDI), has combined calls for financing in Francophone Africa for the evaluation of research systems (GDN's global Doing Research initiative, see below), calls for demand-based institutional support targeting academic institutions, and an innovative regional research fund for young researchers, jointly designed with young researchers from the region. Each of these calls requires different expertise and mechanisms, but they all put local actors involved in research in the driving seat, in particular for the design of the financing window and the choice of methodologies and objectives. The networking among the actors included in the different calls supports the emergence of a group of local researchers best placed to discuss and devise a different research system in the region, including through enhanced cooperation with English-speaking Africa.

Strengthening Research Capacity in Francophone Africa | Global Development Network (<https://www.gdn.int/current-programs/institutional-research-capacity-building>)

Inspiring initiative # 2 – ACE Partner program

The African Centers of Excellence for Higher Education (ACE Impact) project is an initiative of the World Bank and AFD, in collaboration with the governments of 12 countries in West Africa and the Sahel, to support higher education and research in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), environment, climate, agriculture and applied social sciences (education and health). Today, the financing of 53 African Centers of Excellence is strengthening the capacity of these universities to deliver quality training and research for development. Within this framework, the ACE Partner project, the result of an institutional collaboration between the World Bank, the Association of African Universities (AAU), AFD, the Institute of Research for Development (IRD), and Inria,⁶ has structured and strengthened regional thematic networks to promote outreach and scientific collaboration between the Centers of Excellence. These centers have developed a collaboration agenda for training, collaborative research and capacity building for research around common national and regional issues.

Presentation of the ACE Partner project (ace-partner.org)

B. Systematic knowledge production on the state of research, through evaluations of national research systems, an analysis of the systemic opportunities and barriers for research, data production, and the mapping of financing and networks. This information is essential for gaining an understanding of the working conditions of African researchers, in the context of the specific trajectories of countries, and for unleashing the growth of the sector through more targeted investments at both national and international level.

Inspiring initiative # 3 – “Doing Research” initiative of the Global Development Network

The platform plans to invest in the generation of evidence and analyses on the systemic barriers and trends that shape the development of the social sciences across the continent. An example is provided by the global Doing Research initiative of the Global Development Network, which works with local research organizations to conduct an analysis of national research systems in low- and middle-income countries. Through the publication of comparative and systemic evidence on the state of research production, the circulation of research outside academic institutions and its use in public and political debate, this initiative helps build national debates on the quality and value of the social sciences. It also supports more targeted investments suited to their further development by both national and international agencies.

Doing Research – Assessing the Environment for Social Science Research in Developing Countries | Global Development Network (<https://www.gdn.int/doingresearch/methodology>)

⁶ National Institute for Research in Digital Science and Technology, France.

C. A framework to support the design and implementation of “support services” for research, mainly targeting, but not limited to, institutions, and comprising administrative support for communication, the management of research collaborations, language services...

Inspiring initiative # 4 and 5 – Global Africa project and AuthorAID project

The proposed initiative, which would provide support services for research, could draw on the Global Africa project. Built around the journal of the same name, this project primarily offers an “inclusive and multilingual platform” to disseminate high-quality multidisciplinary research on development issues in Africa and connect research to public debate, including through the organization of scientific events. It also proposes capacity building activities, targeting both the ecosystem of scientific publication, through support to actors in the publishing industry, and the individual capacities of young researchers, through mentoring activities, methodological training, assistance with publication, etc. By addressing the many needs of the beneficiaries, these “integrated” services thereby contribute to supporting African research at several levels. Another inspiring initiative is the AuthorAID platform of INASP. AuthorAID is a pioneering program that aims to address the lack of access to research skills through free online training in research writing and writing proposals, mentoring activities, networking and collaboration opportunities, financing for workshops and trips, the integration of research, writing proposals in institutions, as well as approaches to tackle gender inequality in academic institutions. The network consists of 14,000 researchers.

Global Africa | Pan-African Scientific Journal (globalafricasciences.org) – AuthorAID – (<https://www.authoraid.info/en/>)

D. Expertise in the evaluation of research programs and capacity building, which is still in its very early stages for the social sciences. The activities implemented by the mechanism would, for example, aim to assess whether the platform and other initiatives effectively manage to counter the perverse effects of international financing for research in Africa, as identified in the literature, as well as their contribution to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Inspiring initiative # 5 – The Research Quality Plus (RQ+) approach of IDRC

The mechanism will need to offer services to facilitate the application of quality standards and research evaluation mechanisms, drawing on the RQ+ approach developed by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). In addition to the criteria of scientific rigor and excellence, this approach recognizes the importance of integrating contextual factors into the assessment of the quality of research, and of basing evaluations on empirical data. Devised as a flexible and customizable method, it can be applied throughout the research cycle, from its design to the learning phase. By placing a strong focus on evaluation issues, the proposed initiative would make it possible to capitalize on practices and promote experience sharing among research teams, while also placing emphasis on assessing the effectiveness of the financing and services provided by the platform.

Research Quality Plus | IDRC – International Development Research Centre (idrc-crdr.ca)

E. Finally, the platform would create a common and neutral space to share information and regularly gather representatives from the communities that make up the research landscape in Africa: donors, researchers, professions that support research, as well as actors that are not directly connected to the world of research, but could contribute to the definition of needs for knowledge production and transfer to feed into public policies. This space would be based on the existing networks and programs. The specific services would include the management of open databases and research and evaluation repositories on research in Africa, a mapping of donors and financing, directories of professionals specialized in supporting research, open peer review and mentoring programs (see above), as well as the possibility of putting together thematic networks upon request.

This platform would in particular be realized through a website to pool resources and disseminate or give access to information on the various services on offer.

Donors could use the platform to manage some of their own initiatives (A), by pooling capacities for this purpose, as well as specific support services (B-E), and possibly by seconding staff to the platform to provide it with in-kind support. In any case, the platform would be committed to sharing knowledge and tools, and to facilitating common thinking among the actors targeted (national and international donors, local researchers and research institutions, and experts in research policy in Africa).

Inspiring initiative # 6 – EADI, an experience sharing and exchange network

The proposed platform would aim to coordinate exchanges of experience and facilitate knowledge sharing among the various actors from the African social science research community. It could draw on networks of actors such as the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI), which promotes the creation of working groups on themes of interest to its members, both in terms of research production methods and the promotion of results and research trends. By developing tools and creating opportunities for regular meetings around events, the platform would thereby act as a facilitator to identify synergies between the existing initiatives and mechanisms led by a wide array of actors, and improve access to fragmented information for the benefit of researchers, financiers and institutions.

EADI: European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes – (<https://www.eadi.org>)

Conclusion

Whether it involves financing activities for knowledge production or promotion, individual or institutional capacity building, or networking among actors, there are many disparate initiatives to support research in Africa. Building on these experiences as lessons learned from research, this proposal to create a platform to support African social science research for development does not aim to add an “additional” initiative in an already abundant environment. Rather, its objective is to reduce the fragmentation, by offering donors at the initiative of individual projects that do not have the expertise and knowledge required a single platform for knowledge sharing, financing research and managing the administrative aspects, and by providing all the actors with resources and tools that enable collaboration, experience sharing and the search for synergies. In accordance with the principles mentioned above (simplification, sustainability, right of initiative, subsidiarity), the existence of this “single window” would make it possible to implement harmonized and simplified procedures, reducing transaction costs, which are particularly prohibitive for the smallest research institutions. It would also allow financing to be managed free of the directives and interests of financiers, placing the agenda of researchers at the center of operations. Finally, it would draw on national institutions, with a logic of not undermining research systems. Building on an understanding of contexts and specific expertise in operations in the research sector, it would be capable of providing effective services geared to its beneficiaries.

In view of the mass of public and private financing flowing into this sector, its increasing fragmentation,⁷ and the fact that there is no harmonized framework, such an initiative seems not only possible, but highly desirable, provided that actors in financing can be convinced of its relevance, effectiveness and impact. We hope that this advocacy will contribute to this.

⁷ For example, in Sahelian countries alone, the SAFIRE project (see below) reports an eightfold increase in the number of principal donors for research between 2008 and 2017.

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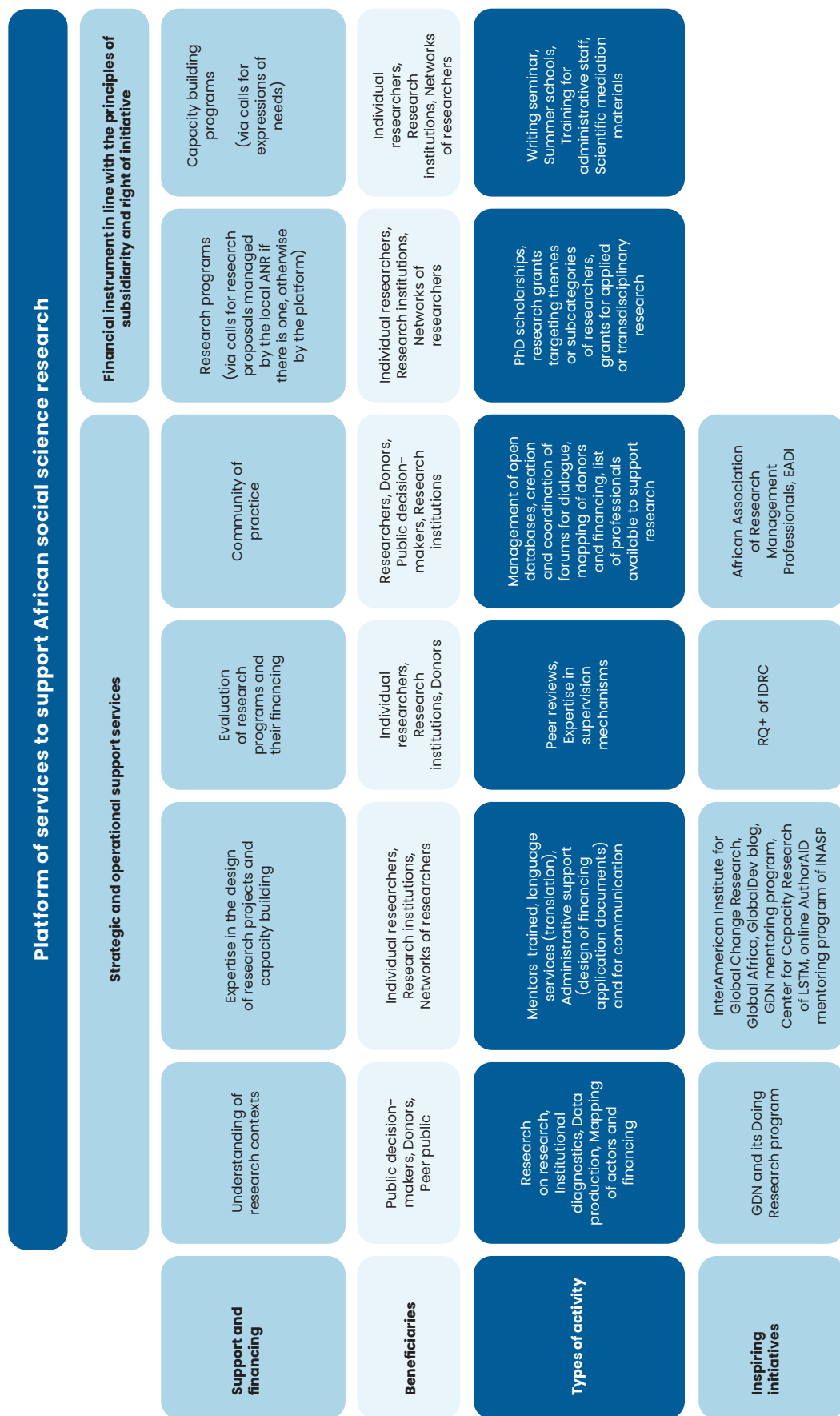
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⁸ Bibliometric report from the research project "SAFIRE: Sahel, Funding Research".

Appendix



Éditions Agence française de développement publishes analysis and research on sustainable development issues. Conducted with numerous partners in the Global North and South, these publications contribute to a better understanding of the challenges faced by our planet and to the implementation of concerted actions within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals. With a catalogue of more than 1,000 titles and an average of 80 new publications published every year, Éditions Agence française de développement promotes the dissemination of knowledge and expertise, both in AFD's own publications and through key partnerships. Discover all our publications in open access at editions.afd.fr. Towards a world in common.

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