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# Evaluation of the ODI Fellowship Scheme: Learning Brief

May 2021

## The ODI Fellowship Scheme at a glance

**Challenge statement:** The civil service in low and middle-income countries frequently operates in challenging environments where human and financial resources are constrained. In these circumstances governments often struggle to attract and retain enough high-quality civil servants with specialist skills, which limits their capacity to design and deliver vital public services and policies.

**Solution:** One way of addressing this is the provision of technical assistance focused on supporting the professional development of civil servants and targeting specific gaps in their technical skills. The ODI Fellowship Scheme is a programme that recruits and posts highly-skilled economists and statisticians to government departments in low- and middle-income countries for 2 years.

**Funding:** Between 2015 and 2020, the Scheme received total funding of £23 million, 86% coming from the Scheme's main donor (UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office). Other donors fund individual Fellowship postings in specific countries or regions, or in specific thematic areas such as antimicrobial resistance and financial inclusion.

**Key facts:**

- ▶ Over 1,000 Fellows posted to more than 40 different countries since establishment in 1963
- ▶ 266 Fellows posted to 37 countries between 2015 and 2020

## Evaluation overview

**Commissioned by:** UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)

**Delivered by:** Ecorys UK, over the period August 2020 - March 2021

**Purpose:** Since the Scheme had not been externally reviewed in over a decade, an evaluation was commissioned to provide FCDO with timely feedback on the Scheme's performance as the 2015-2020 funding cycle came to an end. This would also provide a learning opportunity for other similar programmes.

**Scope:** All recipient Fellowship countries from April 2015 to March 2020

**Approach:** Theory based, mixed methods and participatory

**Aims:** to evaluate how effectively the Scheme contributes to sustainable capacity building, and:

- ▶ Revise the theory of change/assess strength of evidence;
- ▶ Assess how the delivery model compares with similar capacity building schemes;
- ▶ Benchmark ODI's approach to diversity and inclusion against best practice;
- ▶ Assess if ODI's approach to safeguarding and duty of care is sufficient.



## Scheme-wide desk review

We conducted an extensive desk review of available sources including:

- ▶ programme-related documents
- ▶ business cases and annual reviews
- ▶ previous ODI survey data
- ▶ previous reviews of the Scheme
- ▶ reports by other donors to Scheme
- ▶ reviews of similar schemes funded by FCDO



## 120 interviews

We conducted 120 interviews, 53 at a Scheme-wide level and 67 in our four country case studies. Our interviews included:

- ▶ Staff at ODI (7) and FCDO (14)
- ▶ Current and former Fellows (36) and their colleagues (32)
- ▶ External stakeholders (20)
- ▶ Staff at comparator programmes (9)
- ▶ Unsuccessful applicants to the Scheme (3)

## Methods and data sources



## Four country case studies

We selected Guinea-Bissau, Myanmar, Nigeria and Rwanda to provide variation on:

- ▶ geography
- ▶ population
- ▶ income level
- ▶ number of Fellows posted
- ▶ time involved with the Scheme
- ▶ perceived effectiveness of the Scheme (proxied by the number of early terminations and re-assignments)



## Two online surveys

We administered one online survey to Fellows and another to colleagues and supervisors in host organisations:

- ▶ **Languages:** English, French and Portuguese
- ▶ **Shared with:** All Fellows and supervisors 2015-2020
- ▶ **Survey window:** live for one month Nov-Dec 2020
- ▶ **Response rate:** Fellows: 281/356 (79%); Supervisors: 142/259 (55%)
- ▶ **Completion rate:** Fellows: 89%; Supervisors: 80%
- ▶ **Balanced across:** Gender, Cohort, Stream

## Is the Scheme relevant, impactful and efficient?

The Scheme continues to be highly relevant; Fellows address a wide variety of skills gaps and capacity constraints, and strengthen the capacity of colleagues in host organisations. The Scheme also has an unmatched ability to prepare Fellows for influential roles in development.

### ODI Fellows address a wide variety of skills gaps and capacity constraints

Civil service capacity constraints remain in most of the countries that participate in the Scheme. There is a wide variety of gaps across countries and ministries, and Fellows help fill many of these crucial gaps better than alternative short-term consultants. Fellows have rigorous training and varied experience in economics and statistics and bring high levels of technical skills to their teams.

Their contributions cut across many important policy themes and since 2015, ODI Fellows have helped hosts to:

**Provide vital public services:** ODI Fellows supported the decentralisation of textbook procurement in Malawi, allowing millions more books to reach primary schools, and contributed to the design of a water desalination plant in Djibouti with the expectation that potable water in the country would increase by 40%.

**Analyse and design regulatory policies:** ODI Fellows helped: draft Ghana's Petroleum Natural Resource Governance Regulations, design a new national merger control regime in Fiji, and compile a database of business laws and reforms relevant for improving the business environment in Haiti.

**Manage government spending, debt and borrowing:** ODI Fellows developed inflation and GDP forecasting models in the Central Bank of Papua New Guinea, produced an analysis of property taxes in Myanmar that led to increased state revenue, and progressed municipal borrowing policy in the National Treasury of South Africa.

**Promote economic development in key sectors:** ODI Fellows developed strategies for agricultural development in Mozambique and Malawi, and drafted a report that guided the World Bank's maritime transportation investments in the Pacific Islands.

**Enact climate adaptation reforms:** ODI Fellows contributed to national Climate Adaptation Plans in Fiji and Vanuatu and conducted a comprehensive review of biodiversity expenditure in Namibia.

**Respond to public health emergencies:** ODI Fellows identified healthcare system gaps and required health financing in the aftermath of the Ebola outbreak in Liberia and are contributing to the Covid-19 response in Nigeria through work on antimicrobial resistance.

**Negotiate trade deals:** ODI Fellows co-authored a WTO trade facilitation agreement in Malawi, modelled different scenarios to inform free trade negotiations in Ghana, and contributed to the passing of the 'Made in Rwanda' policy.

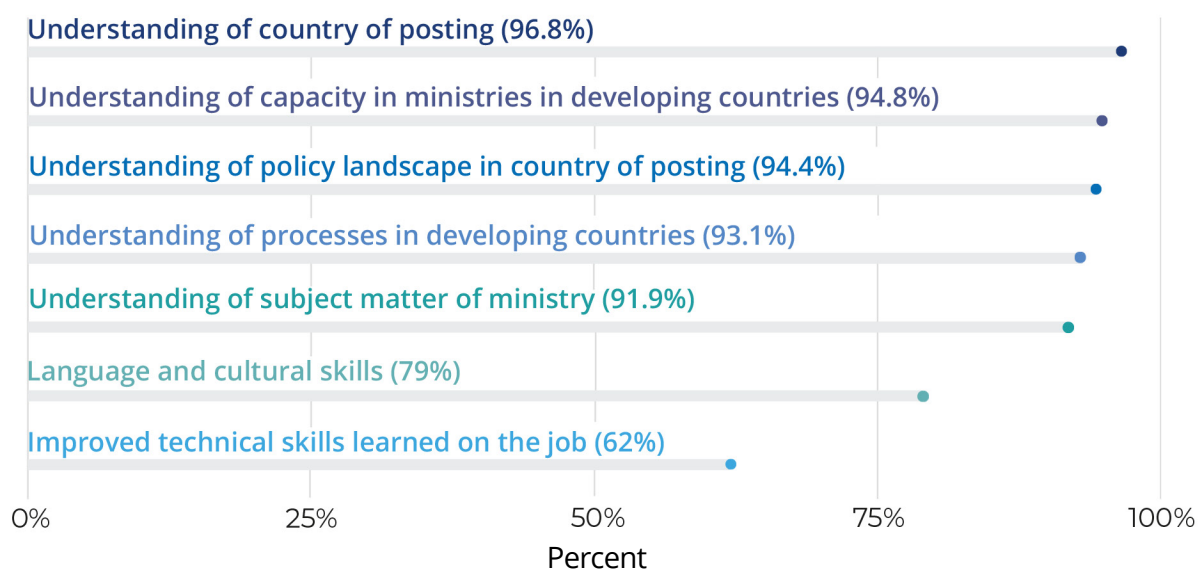
## The work of ODI Fellows contributes to strengthened capacity in host institutions

Fellows contribute to better economic, financial and public sector management both directly, through the design and implementation of high-quality policies, and indirectly, by strengthening the capacity of the teams, systems and networks around them.

Fellows contribute to	Findings	Drivers of impact
<b>Design and implementation of high-quality policies</b>	ODI Fellows collect, manage and analyse high-quality data, prepare budgets and conduct fiscal analysis, as well as build and refine macro-economic models. Additionally, they are involved in the production of planning documents, technical reports, policy papers, research pieces, evaluations, speeches and funding proposals.	ODI Fellows have rigorous training and experience in economics and statistics and bring high levels of technical skills that are often difficult for host ministries to recruit internally.
<b>Improved skills and know-how of hosts to implement policies</b>	ODI Fellows provide both formal and informal training to in-country staff, which helps transfer their understanding of how to implement policies to their colleagues and teams around them. Additionally, ODI Fellows develop and improve the internal systems used by host ministries to implement policies.	ODI Fellows are embedded within their teams for two years, during which time they can invest in delivering training and transferring knowledge to colleagues. This contrasts with the use of external consultants who often deliver isolated assignments on short-term contracts.
<b>Stronger networks of their hosts and greater cooperation</b>	ODI Fellows facilitate the strengthening of networks and coalitions on many levels including within directorates, between ministries, with international donors, and with international investors. They support their in-country colleagues in national and international forums and act as intermediaries between external consultants and their teams.	ODI Fellows often leverage their role as outsiders within their teams to build coalitions. They can also capitalise on the Scheme's good reputation to facilitate good working relationships between host ministries and the international community.
<b>Improved working culture</b>	ODI Fellows often improve the working culture of those around them by increasing motivation and bringing a strong work ethic, diverse set of values, new ideas and fresh perspectives.	ODI Fellows have valuable soft skills, and their professionalism can have a positive demonstration effect on those around them. Their role as an outsider within their teams can also enable them to challenge hierarchies that other colleagues would be uncomfortable challenging.

## The ODI Fellowship Scheme is excellent at preparing professionals for roles in international development

Fellowships provide a valuable mutual learning opportunity for colleagues in host ministries to learn technical skills and for Fellows to learn about developing country contexts. Over 80% of ODI Fellows go on to careers in development, and many former ODI Fellows now work in high-profile roles for a range of influential organisations. The resounding message from these Fellows was that the Fellowship was useful for their career, and that the practical experience they gained in the civil service of their country of posting was an important contribution to their skills and career prospects. Most Fellows reported improvements in:



## The ODI Fellowship Scheme delivers impact at a relatively low cost

There is a broadly positive impression of the efficiency of the scheme and the total cost of an ODI fellow compares favourably with similar schemes. Efficiency is driven by ensuring: economy in the purchase of the few inputs needed; operating with a small central management team; and containing onboarding and preparation costs. However, greater investment in Fellows could increase their impact.

One approach to assessing the value for money of the scheme is to judge the success of Fellows on a portfolio basis. If this logic is applied to the fellowship, then individual Fellows contributing to highly impactful work may make the whole programme good value for money even if some fellows have little or no impact. For example, we document examples of the work of Fellows contributing to fewer teacher strikes in Guinea-Bissau which could have a huge impact on child development, long-term human capital accumulation and lifetime earnings. In Rwanda one Fellow, together with their colleagues, demonstrated that the country had overestimated planned power consumption needs which then resulted in the government halving its target for investments in power stations. Examples like these could easily justify the investment in the fellowship.

## Fellows in focus

### Improving the effectiveness of tax authorities in Myanmar

Two Fellows in Myanmar spent time teaching local government staff in Tuanggyi, Shan State, about the value of raising property tax and training them how to conduct reviews of relevant literature and gather reliable data. They presented options for valuing State properties more realistically and the Shan State government worked with Fellows to co-design a new Municipal Tax Reform evaluation formula. This new formula helped raise property tax three-fold for houses and land and continues to be used today.

“[because of the Fellow] I can now provide training to other towns that want reform. Municipal departments love this new formula, because it will increase their average revenue...This work would not have been possible without ODI Fellows.”

~ Host ministry representative

### Supporting a new debt management department in Uganda

As Uganda tapped into a growing number of domestic and international debt markets, debt management became increasingly important and, in 2015, an ODI Fellow joined the newly formed Debt Management Department within the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development.

Because the department was new, it lacked processes and trained staff. In their first year the Fellow focused on reforming the system of primary dealers and liaising with the Central Bank to develop a domestic debt market, and build a database of domestic debt. In their second year they focused on teaching their colleagues how to use the new systems and gave them formal weekly trainings on domestic debt concepts. They were also instrumental in the development of the newly-formed Contingent Liability Section, whose purpose was to manage Uganda's burgeoning loan guarantees. By the end of the Fellow's final year on the placement, the department had a functioning domestic debt team, to the point where an ODI Fellow was no longer required.

“[They have] been a fantastic addition to our team, helping to train up our young recruits so that our department can carry out its debt management functions fully and effectively. The fact that she was fully embedded in my team, interacting with our young economists on a daily basis, was key to achieving what we have achieved together.”

~ Host ministry representative

### Coordinating the national COVID-19 response in Guinea Bissau




In 2020 the COVID-19 Pandemic rapidly swept across the world and Guinea-Bissau recorded its first cases in March. In response an ODI Fellow working in the Ministry of Health immediately joined the Public Health Emergency Operations Centre (COES) and, recognising the need for a secretariat within COES, set out to build one. The Fellow created an institutional email address to facilitate communication between COES and the rest of the health sector and led communication from it. She organised daily meetings with the team, drafted action items and followed up on them. She was integral to the creation and management of a database of COVID-19 patients in the country at a time when information processes were not yet established. Together with the National Laboratory, she established automated laboratory reports and an online platform to search for COVID-19 test results. Her proactivity, management skills and hard work and dedication resulted in wide praise from her colleagues.

“[She] provided amazing support...was instrumental for the functioning of the COES, vital to its coordination and critical to its ongoing work. We were lucky to have her during the national fight against COVID-19”.

~ Host ministry representatives

## Is the Scheme's delivery model effective?

The evaluation found the Scheme's delivery model on the whole works well, but opportunities for improvement were identified across a number of areas:

-  Weak evidence of effectiveness (few stories/sources)
-  Some evidence of effectiveness (some stories/sources)
-  Strong evidence of effectiveness (many stories/sources)



### Outreach

The diversity of Fellows compares favourably with the overall UK postgraduate population, and the Scheme is open to candidates of all nationalities. However, the ODI does not target outreach towards under-represented groups or follow many best practice systems in recruitment. This, as well as a lack of guidance to applicants about how to complete the written application or prepare for the interview is favouring selection of applicants with links to a subset of academic institutions.



### Selection

Overall, the Fellow interview and selection process is effective. It involves an online application followed by a selection day in which shortlisted candidates take part in a short interview and group assessment containing technical exercises and situational judgement tests that mimic challenges that Fellows often face in-post. It is considered to be amongst the most technically demanding selection processes for graduate development economists, and the emphasis placed on soft skills has improved over time.



### Matching

For the majority of Fellowships the matching process is working well and the skills and experience of the Fellow align with a clear need in the host organisation. However, every year there is a group of Fellows for whom the matching process does not work, resulting in either early terminations of their Fellowship or re-assignment. Scheme management does not put enough resources into ensuring there is clear demand at every participating ministry for the mix of skills and experience selected candidates possess.





## Induction and onboarding

Induction sessions provide Fellows with introductions to Scheme management, briefings on security and health, and a Q&A with former Fellows. However, for some these sessions do not adequately cover the type of work Fellows will be involved in or their capacity development objectives, and do not provide Fellows with enough information or practical guidance tailored to their country of posting. The onboarding process is the responsibility of host organisations and is often viewed by Fellows as unstructured or non-existent, with an insufficient pipeline of work ready for them when they arrive.

## Performance management

The ODI currently takes a hands-off approach to the performance management of Fellows, under the assumption that in-country line managers provide structured professional development in the form of objective setting and performance feedback. However, most Fellows either disagreed or strongly disagreed that this was the case for them during their posting. Poor line management was considered a significant constraint to high-quality work in 12 Fellowship countries, as 50% or more of Fellows surveyed who were placed in these countries claimed this.

## In-post support

The ODI management team are generally seen as responsive and do provide the necessary support to Fellows during their postings. However, some Fellows would prefer more active support in areas such as personal wellbeing, and a more structured system for them to access technical support. These gaps in support are generally perceived to be the result of a small and stretched core management team, but there is scope for ODI to do more to formalise links between its Fellows and its networks of academics and in-country practitioners.

## Safeguarding

Despite significant progress in several aspects of the Scheme's approach to safeguarding and duty of care, safeguarding has still not been fully institutionalised within the Fellowship Scheme, and policies and practices to ensure a fail-safe system remain incomplete.

## What drives maximum impact?

The evaluation found that not all ODI Fellowship postings were equally impactful at strengthening civil service capacity and contributing to better economic, financial and public sector management. We identified the following actions that Fellowship programmes should take to maximise the impact of their Fellows.



### 1. Communicate a clear definition of capacity building to all parties involved

A recurring issue emerged from many stakeholder groups; there was a general lack of clarity about the exact role and purpose of the individual Fellows and how they should most effectively support their host organisations. The central point of ambiguity was whether Fellows should be filling a gap in skills and giving embedded support over time or whether they should be focusing on building the capacity of colleagues through the development of systems and more focused and structured training. To avoid this ambiguity Fellowship schemes should clearly communicate to host organisations and Fellows their understanding of what capacity building is, and the expectations they and others have of the role and objectives of individual Fellows. Clearly defined roles and objectives will in turn allow for more effective performance management of individual Fellows and greater impact on host organisations.



### 2. Identify and prioritise posts where Fellows can excel in their roles

There are a number of constraints that can limit the ability of Fellows to excel in their roles. We found the following were the most common:

- ▶ a lack of buy-in from senior management, supervisors and colleagues
- ▶ poor line management and performance management
- ▶ not having the necessary office equipment to work effectively
- ▶ political upheaval or corruption
- ▶ language or cultural issues

It is important that fellowship programmes devote enough resources towards ensuring that these constraints to effective working are minimised. They can do so in the following ways. Firstly there should be detailed and careful discussions with host ministries on the nature of their needs, their plans and objectives for the fellow and the exact skills, and language abilities, they require. Secondly fellowship schemes should identify and prioritise postings where Fellows are likely to have the necessary support and environment to excel in their roles. This includes conducting thorough due diligence of host ministries pre-departure to ensure that there is a clear demand for a Fellow and that they are sufficiently prepared to receive them. Thirdly, once in post, the fellowship management team should take an active role in the performance management of Fellows, as well as provide both Fellows and their supervisors with access to technical resources and resources from previous fellowships.



### 3. Collect and thoroughly analyse evidence of impact to guide learning

We found little evidence of the ODI making a consistent effort to measure its short- or long-term impact on host organisations. We also found that the ODI does not systematically capture lessons learnt from Fellows or supervisors on best practice in building the long term capacity of host organisations. Both activities appear to be an important missed opportunity and that is why we advise that going into the future Fellowship schemes should develop monitoring, evaluation and learning strategies.

These strategies will enable evidence of impact to be collected from Fellows and partner organisations, which can in turn be analysed and used to support improvements in the management of the programme over time. Such strategies should aim to report on impacts that are sustained beyond the two year posting of an individual Fellow, and will contribute to our collective understanding of what the barriers to sustainable capacity development are and how they can be addressed. Strategies should also include regular, comprehensive assessments of early terminations and reassignments, to generate learning and maximise the efficiency of the scheme.

#### Further reading:

**Evaluation materials:** 'Evaluation of the ODI Fellowship Scheme Executive Summary', Ecorys UK, 2021; 'Evaluation of the ODI Fellowship Scheme Report', Ecorys UK, 2021. Both found on the evaluation's webpage ([link](#))

**Best practices in recruitment:** 'What Works: Gender Equality by Design', Bohnet 2016 ([link](#))

**Constraints to civil service development:** 'Who Serves the Poor? Surveying Civil Servants in the Developing World', Rogger 2017 ([link](#)); 'Innovating Bureaucracy for a More Capable Government', World Bank 2019 ([link](#))

**Value of effective performance management:** 'Does Management Matter? Evidence from India', Bloom et al. 2013 ([link](#))

**Value for money:** FCDO Research Blog 'Lessons from a year at DFID' Glennerster (FCDO Chief Economist) 2019 ([link](#))



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