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Evaluation of FCDO's funding of the ODI Fellowship Scheme

April 2021

Final report

Executive summary

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The ODI Fellowship Scheme

All countries would benefit from the presence of a high calibre, efficient and effective civil service. Unfortunately, in low- and middle-income countries the civil service frequently operates in challenging environments where human and financial resources are constrained. In these circumstances governments often struggle to attract and retain high-quality civil servants. When bureaucratic quality and capacity is low, even modest improvements can have a substantial impact. One way of helping to achieve this is by providing technical assistance for capacity building programmes focused on supporting the professional development of civil servants and targeting specific gaps in their technical skills.

The ODI (Overseas Development Institute) Fellowship Scheme is a programme that operates through the direct provision of staff with specific technical skills to public institutions in low- and middle-income countries. Since its establishment in 1963 it has sent more than 1,000 economists and statisticians on two-year postings to more than 40 countries across Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, the Pacific and the Western Balkans. As well as providing developing country governments with high-calibre junior economists and statisticians, it also aims to give postgraduate economists and statisticians professional experience working for, and within, local institutions in developing countries. Over the 2015–2020 period, 266 Fellows were posted to 37 countries. The largest funder of the scheme is the FCDO which, over the period 2015–2020, provided £19.7 million (86%) of the total budget of £23 million. Other donors fund individual fellowships in specific countries and geographic regions such as the Pacific, or thematic areas such as antimicrobial resistance and financial inclusion.

Purpose and scope of the evaluation

The primary purpose of this evaluation is to provide the FCDO with timely feedback on the scheme to inform the FCDO's consideration of future funding. The scope of this evaluation spans the period April 2015 to March 2020 and covers all recipient countries (with in-depth analysis through four country case studies).

This evaluation assesses the effectiveness of the scheme at achieving its aims in five ways:

1. Evaluate how effectively the scheme contributes to sustainable capacity building (its intended impact).
2. Revise the theory of change and assess the strength of evidence for its components.
3. Assess how the delivery model compares with other similar capacity building schemes funded by the FCDO.
4. Benchmark the scheme's approach to diversity and inclusion against best practice.
5. Assess whether the scheme's approach to safeguarding and duty of care is sufficient.

Evaluation approach

There are three components to our approach. Firstly, we took a [theory-based approach](#) to assess the contribution of the scheme to its stated objectives and used a capacity-focused theory of change to gather evidence and draw conclusions. We employed an organisational capacity framework to inform the design of our data collection methods and over the course of the evaluation revised the scheme's theory of change. At the same time, we conducted contribution analysis to assess the contribution made by the scheme to developing capacity. This provided us with in-depth understanding of the mechanisms behind change and the external factors that influence the programme's outcomes and impact. Secondly, we took a [mixed method](#) approach to collecting data which allowed us to build a rich picture of all of the elements of the scheme, and to triangulate results from different sources to try to ensure our conclusions were robust. Finally, our approach was [participatory](#), engaging with programme stakeholders such as ODI and the FCDO throughout the evaluation to ensure ownership of the findings and recommendations.

Data collection methods

We used four primary data collection methods: a desk review; semi-structured interviews; a survey of Fellows and their supervisors, and four country case studies.

Desk review: We conducted an extensive desk review of available sources including programme-related documents, FCDO business cases and annual reviews; previous survey data collected by the ODI; previous reviews of the ODI Fellowship Scheme; reports by other donors to the programme; and published reviews of other similar schemes funded by the FCDO.

Self-report survey: Based on results from the desk review, initial interviews and our organisational capacity framework, we designed a 72 question survey for Fellows and a 32 question survey for the supervisors of Fellows. The surveys were available in English, French and Portuguese, and circulated to all Fellows and supervisors who had participated in the scheme between 2015 and 2020, including fellowships not financed by the FCDO. The survey was live for one month and weekly reminders were sent to non-responders. We received 423 responses from Fellows (281) and supervisors (142), with response rates of 79% and 55% respectively. Eighty-nine per cent of Fellows, and 80% of supervisors completed all questions in the survey. Our Fellows' survey was balanced along gender and cohort, and the statistics stream was proportionally represented.

Semi-structured interviews: We conducted 120 interviews: 53 at a scheme-wide level and 67 in our four country case studies. Our interviews included: those managing the programme at the ODI (7); FCDO staff members (14); current and former Fellows (36); colleagues in host organisations (32); unsuccessful applicants to the scheme (3); staff at comparator programmes (9); and external stakeholders who were knowledgeable about the scheme (20).

Four country case studies: Case study countries (Guinea-Bissau, Myanmar, Nigeria and Rwanda) were selected to provide variation along several relevant dimensions: geography, the number of Fellows posted, how long the country has been part of the scheme, and its perceived effectiveness (proxied by the number of early terminations and re-assignments). Country-specific desk reviews and semi-structured interviews were conducted by in-country researchers

in local languages and focused on building rich and granular stories of the contribution made by Fellows and detailing the factors that influenced their perceived effectiveness.

Findings

Relevance

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 (for example by collecting high-quality data, preparing budgets, and writing technical reports and policy papers) or whether they should be focusing on building the capacity of colleagues through the development of systems and more focused and structured training. Despite the duration of the scheme's focus on strengthening institutions, the scheme is still somewhat vague about what capacity building is and what works best for building the capacity of civil services. This is a drawback when communicating with host organisations, the FCDO and Fellows themselves, the expectations they and others have of the role and objectives of Fellows.

With these reservations and despite its longevity the [central goal of the scheme remains highly relevant](#). In most countries in which the scheme operates, capacity constraints related to the recruitment and retention of high-calibre staff in economic and wider public management remain. The specific local skills gaps present vary widely between countries and host organisations, and Fellows help fill a wide range of these crucial gaps. The establishment of a specialised stream in statistics was widely praised as a valued and relevant development and some encouraged the scheme to develop further specialised streams such as digitalisation, climate finance and organisational management.

The scheme is [highly aligned with FCDO strategic objectives](#) around economic management for poverty reduction and good statistics to inform good decision-making. In this evaluation we document many examples of Fellows contributing to potentially highly impactful work aligned with these objectives. However, the scheme does not systematically document or communicate this impact to Fellows, its donors, or the wider public. This appears to be a missed opportunity.

Stakeholders also highlighted that Fellows mostly operate at high levels of government, and the large amount of good will they garner, is often a [strong tool for soft power and key for diplomacy](#). In some countries the scheme is seen as a part of the history of the relations between two countries and one senior stakeholder warned that cutting funding to the scheme could cause significant damage to diplomatic relations with the UK. Finally, many stakeholders emphasised that the Fellowship is unmatched in its potential to train and prepare high-calibre professionals for roles in development.

Effectiveness

Selection. The process by which ODI selects candidates is performing well. The technical assessment in economics and statistics is demanding and Fellows are consistently recognised for their strong technical abilities. The selection process also effectively screens applicants on important soft skills through situational judgement tests developed to mimic the challenges that Fellows may face in their posting. For most Fellowships, the process of matching Fellows to their

host organisation is working well with high levels of satisfaction amongst Fellows and supervisors surveyed. Most Fellows believed that their posting reflected their technical skills and qualifications, policy interests and personal preferences.

The matching process. Many Fellows are motivated to apply for the Fellowship specifically because they want to support their host organisations and have an impact on economic development and poverty reduction in developing countries. Yet 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 to another ministry. For these Fellows this can be deeply frustrating, particularly because these mismatches are often identified as the result of insufficient due diligence on the part of the management team. The team currently does not put enough resources into the identification of new posts, or the assessment of follow-on posts. In both cases more effort needs to be put into ensuring there is clear demand at the ministry level for a specific set of skills, and a supportive line manager that has an idea as to how the Fellow can be utilised.

Induction and onboarding. The induction of Fellows is seen in a broadly positive light, with Fellows receiving introductions to scheme management, briefings on security and health, and a Q&A with former Fellows. However, there is room for improvement with Fellows wanting more clarity on: the type of work they will be involved in, their capacity development objectives, and how to best to achieve them; as well as more practical guidance and sessions that are tailored to their country of posting. The quality of the onboarding process of new Fellows to host organisations varies a lot. The process is the responsibility of host organisations and is often seen by Fellows to be unstructured or non-existent, with an insufficient pipeline of work ready for them when they arrive. This is a key constraint to their effectiveness.

Performance. The ODI currently takes a hands-off approach to the performance management of Fellows. The working assumption is that Fellows integrate with hosts and that structured professional development will be in the form of objective setting and performance feedback from in-country line managers. However, this is rare and poor line management is identified as the most common impediment to effective work. A key constraint to Fellows growing in their roles is a lack of guidance from the ODI, and there is a clear demand from Fellows for more mentoring and support from the ODI, including objective setting, and the monitoring of progress and performance. Fellows would like more support to develop in their roles and a serious lack of performance management and professional support from the scheme is having a detrimental effect on the effectiveness of Fellows.

Support to Fellows. The ODI management team are generally seen as responsive and to be providing the necessary support to Fellows during their postings, yet are constrained in their capacity to do so. Some Fellows would prefer more active support from the ODI management in areas such as personal wellbeing, and technical support to be more effective in their jobs. This is generally perceived to be the result of a small and stretched core management team. Fellows would have welcomed a clearer system for them to draw from technical support and it seems like a missed opportunity from ODI given its links to academics and in-country practitioners. Similarly access to technical resources and training to aid them in their jobs was welcomed by Fellows. Some Fellows encouraged more post-fellowship support for outgoing fellows and saw it as a missed opportunity given the size of the ODI alumni network. ODI Fellows placed in the

same country are considered the most significant source of support and provide a network to one another during their placements.

Safeguarding. The ODI has made progress in several aspects of its approach towards safeguarding and duty of care in recent years and the fellowship's overall response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been viewed as successful by Fellows. Fellows acknowledged the promptness with which the ODI reacted, the evacuations that were made possible, and the frequent advice and communication provided to Fellows who were unable to evacuate. However, in a few cases leaving their posting damaged the relationship Fellows had with their host organisation. Despite considerable progress, safeguarding has still not been sufficiently institutionalised within the fellowship, and policies and practices to ensure a fail-safe system remain incomplete.

Equity

The scheme is open to candidates of all nationalities who have at least a master's degree in economics, statistics, or a related field. However, certain academic institutions (especially in the UK) have a long history of students successfully applying to become a Fellow and have built up institutional knowledge and a rich network of former Fellows to consult. There is evidence that a current 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.

We benchmarked the diversity of Fellows with data from the FCDO and the UK national average for postgraduate students along four metrics: ethnicity, sexuality, disability and parental education (a proxy for socio-economic background). We find that the [scheme has room for improvement with respect to disability and socio-economic background](#). The ODI does not currently prioritise the recruitment of under-represented groups or follow many best practice systems in recruitment. It also does not have a system to collect or aggregate diversity data for all applicants. This makes it challenging to assess the diversity of the applicant pool, or at which stage of the application process any barriers to inclusion are greatest.

The ODI has made [substantial improvements to its safeguarding and duty of care procedures in recent years](#). It has given specific attention to addressing frequently raised concerns around a lack of support and feelings of isolation. A buddy system now operates as well as a specialised counselling service. However, the ODI does not compare favourably to comparator programmes on the level of psychological support it provides, and some issues pertinent to those with protected characteristics remain, for example understanding and preventing sexual harassment in the workplace.

Impact

What do Fellows do?

Fellows engage in a number of activities during their postings. A core form of support is both formal and informal training to in country staff on various topics at the individual as well as groups level. There is strong evidence of Fellows being involved in the collection, collation, construction and management of high-quality data which in turn is valued by host organisations. Fellows have utilised non-traditional data sources, harmonised trade data, automated cleaning processes, constructed indices and supported the design and implementation of surveys. They

often provide support by preparing budgets and fiscal analysis and building and refining macro-economic models. Additionally, they have been involved in the production of many different types of documents including planning documents, technical reports, policy papers, research pieces, evaluations and funding proposals, as well as helping to draft speeches for senior civil servants.

Fellows perform some administrative and managerial tasks using organisational skills for the management of meetings, information, time, and communication and some more generic skills. They have networks and connections that they utilise and are active members of committees at ministry, national and international level. They support their colleagues in national and international forums and act as intermediaries between external consultants and their teams. Their soft skills are consistently mentioned alongside their technical skills including a hard work ethic, adaptability, a collaborative working style, clear communication, and personability.

The impact of Fellows

The work of Fellows may contribute to the strengthening of five capacity outcomes identified at the inception phase as key dimensions likely to be impacted by the contribution of Fellows based on the Organisational Capacity Framework (OCF)¹. We assessed the strength of evidence linking the work of Fellows to these outcomes and in each case identified key drivers of impact. We found that, overall, the [ODI's management, support and leverage plays a key role](#) in influencing whether Fellows have a productive and useful Fellowship or not.

There was consistent and strong evidence that Fellows [contribute to the capacity of individuals and teams, and some evidence that they contributed to strengthened systems and institutions](#). Colleagues benefited from Fellows' understanding of how to apply technical knowledge and skills to practical policy issues. Fellows also developed and improved internal systems including setting up functioning committees; building personnel and HR systems; streamlining processes and introducing new software and data-management systems. These systems that were set up were a key driver of impact. Giving formal training to colleagues in, for example, debt management was also key to strengthening the capacity of teams.

There was substantial evidence that the work of Fellows contributed to [better economic, financial and public sector management](#) through the design and implementation of many high-quality policies, programmes, strategies and action plans within their ministries. They did so either directly through co-working on a project with their colleagues, or indirectly by strengthening the capacity of the team around them who, in turn, would draft improved strategies and policies. We found strong evidence of the former and tentative evidence of the latter. Fellows brought valued technical skills to their teams and the embedded nature of Fellows, which contrasts with the use of external consultants, was a key driver of impact.

¹ World Bank (2012) *Guide to Evaluating Capacity Development Results: A Collection of Guidance Notes to Help Development Practitioners and Evaluators Assess Capacity Development Efforts*, [link](#)

Below are examples of some of the contributions made by Fellows to impactful strategies and policies in the last six years:

- **Agricultural development:** Drafting, lobbying for and securing cabinet and parliamentary approval for the Warehouse Receipt Bill, a regulatory framework for agricultural development in Malawi.
- **Competition policy:** Redesigning Fiji's merger control regime and drafting the National Competition and Consumer Protection policy.
- **Debt and borrowing:** Improving inflation and GDP forecasting models in the Central Bank of Papua New Guinea. Working with a team to progress municipal borrowing policy in the National Treasury of South Africa.
- **Disaster response:** Identifying healthcare system gaps and required health financing in Liberia in the aftermath of the Ebola outbreak; contributing to the Covid-19 response in Nigeria through work on antimicrobial resistance.
- **Education:** Ranking all senior high schools in Ghana based on performance, which later influenced national policy; supporting the decentralisation of textbook procurement in Malawi, allowing millions more books to reach primary schools.
- **Health:** Designing National Health Accounts and Client Satisfaction Surveys in Tanzania; developing health sector strategic plans in Sierra Leone; Benefit Incidence Analysis in Ethiopia.
- **Investment decisions:** Developing a report that guided the World Bank's maritime transportation investments in the Pacific Islands. Developing and negotiating a 30-year, \$300 million concession agreement for a deep-water port on behalf of the Government of Timor-Leste.
- **Natural resources:** Drafting the Petroleum Natural Resource Governance Regulations in Ghana; advising on contract negotiations in the National Minerals Agency of Sierra Leone for two mining lease agreements worth a total forecasted net present value exceeding \$1 billion.
- **Revenue generation:** Strengthening the Domestic Resource Mobilisation strategy of Liberia; producing a comprehensive analysis of property taxes in Myanmar that led to increased state revenue.
- **Subsidies:** Analysis on fuel subsidy reform in Sierra Leone that later contributed to a reform being passed.
- **Trade negotiations:** Supporting bilateral trade negotiations between Vanuatu and New Caledonia. Co-authoring a WTO trade facilitation agreement in Malawi. Modelling different scenarios to inform free trade negotiations in Ghana. Contributing to the passing of the 'Made in Rwanda' policy.
- **Water:** In Djibouti, designing the first EU funded water desalination plant in the Horn of Africa with the expectation that potable water in the country would increase by 40%.

There was consistent and strong evidence that [Fellows facilitate the strengthening of networks and coalitions on many levels](#) including within directorates, between ministries, with international donors, and with international investors. There are many examples of Fellows building new networks, establishing new partnerships and co-producing research with international and local partners. Fellows have helped to build the environment for future international investment and supported the membership process of international organisations including Vanuatu's accession to the WTO and Rwanda's membership of the OECD. Fellows utilise their existing networks and knowledge of the international system, including their ODI network, to strengthen the networks of their host organisation. They also leverage their role as an outsider to build coalitions and can capitalise on the scheme's good reputation to facilitate good working relationships between host organisations and the international community.

There was consistent and strong evidence that [Fellows improve the working culture of those around them](#). They increased motivation and brought both a strong work ethic and diverse values. The professionalism of the Fellows and their attitude to work was perceived to have a positive demonstration effect on those around them acting as an example of how another way of working was possible. In other cases, Fellows were valued by their colleagues for bringing new ideas and a fresh perspective. Others improved the working culture by challenging hierarchies that other colleagues would be uncomfortable challenging.

There is [strong evidence that Fellows go on to work in development](#). We found considerable evidence of Fellows continuing their careers in development and working for international organisations (UNDP, UNICEF, UNDF), multilateral banks (IDB, ADB, AfDB, World Bank), central banks, universities, research organisations focused on economic development, international development consultancies, and government departments such as ministries of economy, of health, education, foreign affairs or international development (FCDO, SIDA or GIZ) across European, American, Asian and African countries. Both Fellows and later their employers stressed that being an ODI Fellow leads to an improved understanding of developing contexts which is valued on a personal and professional level.

Sustainability

We found only [modest evidence that the contributions made by Fellows have the potential to be sustained](#). The main ways in which their contributions had lasting impact is through the [improved capacity of colleagues](#) and the strengthening of [institutional systems](#) that will outlive their placements. This finding points to the importance of Fellows working collaboratively with local colleagues rather than independently to get tasks done. However, staff turnover is high in many host organisations, and poses a challenge to how hosts can retain strengthened institutional knowledge. Actions that increase the likelihood of sustainability include improving existing processes and systems, formal structured training, and developing training materials to be used after Fellows leave. Some Fellows stay [in their fellowship countries beyond their posting](#), and others stay in touch with their host organisation professionally, both of which indicate the potential for impact beyond their posting.

We found [limited evidence of the ODI making a consistent effort to measure its short- or long-term impact](#). Debriefs with Fellows and lesson sharing are dependent on agreement between the host organisation and the Fellow and varies widely across placements. However, we found

no substantial evidence of the ODI management team participating in these sessions or capturing lessons learnt in a systematic way even when there is re-assignment of a Fellow. There is also limited evidence of the ODI actively promoting principles to strengthen sustainability beyond postings, and there does not appear to be a strategy to guide engagement with host organisations and elicit what they think the sustainable impact of Fellows is. Any longer-term benefit to the host organisations beyond a placement is only anecdotally gathered, and there is very limited evidence of any systematic effort to assess the longer-term benefits of placements although this is acknowledged to also be a common challenge shared with comparator schemes.

Monitoring of impact is an area where the fellowship [compares unfavourably to comparator schemes](#) such as fellowships from Improving Global Health and Oxford Policy Fellowships, both of which have a dedicated member of staff for monitoring and evaluation. Although the ODI keeps a record of ex-Fellows and the extent to which they stay within the international development space, it does not do enough to learn from the experiences of Fellows to improve the scheme despite many being keen to share these experiences.

Efficiency

There is a broadly [positive impression of the efficiency of the scheme](#). It has stayed within budget over the review period and the total cost of an ODI fellow compares favourably with similar resident adviser schemes. It also compares favourably when extrapolating the replacement costs of a Fellow from, for example, a consulting firm. Efficiency in the scheme 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 development 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 demonstrated to colleagues that the country had overestimated planned power consumption needs which eventually resulted in the government's 5-year energy strategy halving its target for investments in power stations. Examples like these could easily justify the investment in the fellowship.

Lessons learned

We draw out the key lessons from our evaluation:

1. Embedded technical assistance and capacity development support remains a need for many of the countries where the ODI Fellowship Scheme places Fellows.
2. A clear definition of capacity development is important and must be communicated to the scheme's participants.
3. Government demand for technical assistance is essential to the scheme's success but can be defined more robustly.
4. The ODI Fellowship Scheme, as one of the longest standing fellowships, needs to adapt continuously to remain relevant.
5. Fellowships should work to prioritise high-quality and impactful posts where Fellows have the necessary support and environment to excel in their roles.
6. Communicating impact achieved by Fellows is essential to demonstrate the effectiveness and impact of the scheme.
7. It is difficult to assess the sustainability of the results achieved, but this is key to understanding if sustainable capacity has been developed.
8. An effective knowledge-sharing platform for Fellows and a learning strategy for the ODI to guide learning and help disseminate lessons would benefit the long-term effectiveness of the scheme.
9. A thorough analysis of early terminations and reassignments is key to ensuring the fellowship is effective and efficient.
10. The diversity of the scheme is limited by the diversity of the eligible population and requires additional investment to be ensured.

Recommendations to the ODI

Relevance to the scheme:

- The FCDO and ODI should work together to agree a definition of capacity development.
- Work with host countries/organisations to develop engagement strategies.
- Consider creating more specialised streams.

Effectiveness of the scheme:

- Prioritise ensuring quality postings by conducting more thorough research and due diligence on each posting, in particular the demand from local senior civil servants.
- Make language fluency an official requirement for some postings and increase the official language allowance in others.
- Incorporate recommendations made by Fellows to strengthen the usefulness of the induction week.
- Work to ensure that host organisations strengthen their onboarding process.
- Develop a plan for the performance management and professional development of Fellows.
- Provide more support to Fellows during their placements by drawing from their networks and providing a hub of resources for them to draw upon.

Equity:

- Make a more concerted effort to diversify the scheme.

Impact of the scheme:

- Develop a strategy for monitoring, evaluation and learning that will enable the ODI to improve over time and demonstrate impact. Consider hiring a new staff member for this role.

Efficiency:

- Devote sufficient resources to address the above-mentioned recommendations and prioritise high-quality fellowships.

Recommendations to the FCDO:

- Continue to fund the ODI Fellowship Scheme for the next business case.
- Seek internal alignment when defining objectives for funding the Fellowship Scheme.
- Avoid making changes to the priorities of the scheme within funding cycles.
- Together with other donors sit in a steering committee whose approval is required for engagement strategies and post criteria checklists for new placements.
- Amend the scheme's logical framework to include a broader range of qualitative and quantitative indicators.

Further information

A short learning brief for the evaluation can be found together with the full final report on the project webpage [here](#).

For any additional requests related to this evaluation please contact: joe.stclair@ecorys.com

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