



Introduction: The ODI Fellowship Scheme: The Future of Technical Cooperation?

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This enhanced guide to the ODI Fellowship Scheme and the annexed directory of its alumni is this year illustrated with the comments and reflections of the former ODI Fellows who spoke at the anniversary event in the House of Commons on 15 July 2003. I was one of them for as well as being in charge of the ODI Fellowship Scheme for most of the past decade, I too was an ODI Fellow a generation ago (with the Government of Malawi, 1974–76).

It is a mark of the affection in which the Scheme is held that not a single person, however distinguished in public life or business, whom I asked to speak turned us down; furthermore nearly 200 former Fellows dispersed across the world found their way to attend the event in London in mid-summer. It was only regrettable that we could not fly in our real partners from the developing world – the permanent secretaries, national directors and ministers with whom we finalise placements in thirty-three countries – but they were amply represented by the London-based High Commissioners and Ambassadors. We continue to meet the principals in-country every year to discuss their needs, deliberate over preferred candidates and finalise the details for the established post to be filled, for an ODI Fellowship while being an award and an honour, is nothing if not a proper two-year assignment for a jobbing economist.

Our alumni range their reflections over the period when the Scheme started, when the Nuffield Foundation provided the seed-money and when the gifted brain of the ODI's first Director, William Clark, devised the Fellowship model which still broadly holds, for several of them served as Fellows in Africa in the early years of independence. I want to respond here though to three frequently-asked-questions which arise from such commentaries (and are sometimes more than implicit in them)

- Is the Scheme really demand-led?
- Isn't technical assistance simply self-perpetuating?
- While is it clear the Fellows benefit, including in their future careers, is that all?

In short, I want to explain why we are still running something called the ODI Fellowship Scheme, with larger numbers of Fellows, forty years later, and several decades after African, Pacific and Caribbean countries achieved their independence.

The short answer to the demand question is that we make Fellowship placements only at the request of governments. We also insist that they pay the normal local salary for the established post of economist, senior economic adviser etc. in the administration. [We could not normally pay international junior professional economist-level emoluments without supplementary funding, of course, and we are grateful particularly to DFID (and its predecessor ministries in the British Government) who have been our major funders for the Scheme over the years]. We hold annual discussions with all our partners to ensure that the most appropriate unfilled posts for applied economists are prioritised and matched to the qualifications and experience of our current cohort of Fellows. And finally, Fellows have a contract of employment with their government, as a civil servant of the country concerned, and with official reporting arrangements locally, as final proof that they are both wanted and needed. When new countries enter the Scheme, it is because they approach ODI – and also invariably because the reputation of ODI and its Fellows precedes us. Thus the Government of Rwanda (which now has one of our bigger country-programmes) initially approached us because they saw how effective ODI Fellows had been in neighbouring Uganda's post-conflict reconstruction and development phase and wanted some of the same. (They started with a single Fellow in the Ministry of Finance, who now works for DFID in Beijing). Similarly, this year the Caribbean Regional Negotiating Machinery (CRNM) of CARICOM were impressed by the performance of ODI Fellows serving in international trade-related



posts in Caribbean Community and other member states, and, already comfortable with working with ODI in trade policy analysis, requested a Fellow of their own. We filled that post, but we continue to have more good requests than we have the wherewithal to fill; demand remains buoyant. In fact all three questions can at least partly be answered by explaining how the Scheme has changed in recent years, both to anticipate and to meet such demands. The two-gap theory of development (which anyway neglected the human resource gap which the ODI Scheme explicitly endeavours to address) hardly applies today, but fully half our posts tend to be in Finance ministries and Treasuries where – just as in the UK – decisions on public expenditure management and its effects on the poor are prepared: these posts represent the articulated priorities of the governments concerned. Several of them now explicitly encompass donor/creditor relations too, whether on debt management or PRSP programmes. When monetary policy was rising in prominence for developing countries, we sent Fellows to work in Central Banks. Now we send health economists not just to work in Health Ministries but also into national coordinating bodies for HIV-AIDS programmes. Long ago, we identified the under-resourcing of trade and industry ministries in small countries on the international trade side and helped them cope with their multilateral, regional and bilateral relations by expanding the supply of trade policy Fellows. Similarly, we now supply qualified environmental economists to specialised national and regional bodies and social sector economists to Ministries of Education and Health where once we just supplied agricultural economists to natural resource ministries or forestry departments. So, unlike in the early days, very few of our Fellows work on projects and a surprisingly large number find themselves dialoguing with (and sometimes even negotiating ‘against’) donors or the World Bank or the IMF.

Similarly, the countries have changed. The Scheme operated only in Eastern Africa in its early years (it would be unthinkable now for Mauritius, one of the first countries of placement and then rather bereft, to need an ODI Fellow) but we have long since expanded into the Caribbean and the Pacific, where our Fellows are particularly valued not only by the governments who employ them but also by diplomatic missions who welcome the ODI presence. When we moved into Mozambique and later Rwanda and this year Burundi, it required all the Scheme’s resources to supply appropriate, trained, language-friendly economists but we made it.

Curious to relate, the first ODI Fellows really were fellas! I am happy to report that when I went to Malawi on the Scheme in 1974, it seemed perfectly normal that equal opportunities applied, but the archives tell me not only that the first Fellows were exclusively male, but that women were only admitted from the early 1970s. They now constitute about half of each cohort – a proportion which represents fairly the share of applications and also the numbers of women taking development and socio-economic options in their university degrees. At heart, the Fellowship Scheme is its people and we select the best and the most appropriate on merit. There are no longer any nationality restrictions: if there had been, we would not have been able to respond so well with Romance-language economists to fill Mozambique’s posts (if they have only French, Spanish or Italian, or rudimentary Portuguese, we send them on ahead for language immersion and training); Mozambique is currently our biggest programme and our Italian and Spanish Fellows there and elsewhere have acquitted themselves particularly well. We also take French-speaking economists for Rwanda and Burundi; Swahili is an advantage in Tanzania and in posts in the Government of Zanzibar particularly. Burrow deep into the family history of most ODI Fellows nowadays and you will find a parent or close relative from or with links to a developing country; in addition, our current Fellows include nationals of India, Pakistan, Ghana, St Lucia and Angola, as well as of European or Commonwealth countries; about half are UK nationals.

The Scheme is also a lot larger: more partner countries but also more Fellowships awarded overall: whereas barely a decade ago, we would award about 17 Fellowships per year, in the past two years we have been able to afford over thirty. There will be 64 Fellows in the field this year in the first or second year of their assignment; in addition to the local payments by the host government, we have expanded grant funding from DFID and extended the group of funders to the Commonwealth Secretariat and some branches of the UN, with further prospect of drawing on some EU funding in future.

Lastly, all Fellows are required to have at least a Master’s degree (in Economics if their first degree is not), which was not the case in the early years of the Scheme, when Fellows went out on graduating (gap years were unknown). Many nowadays have further qualifications and years of work experience – these are often among those most requested by governments – and a sprinkling have completed their PhDs. We continue to have a tiny rate of attrition and are concerned that even the larger number of Fellowships awarded should not in any sense be taken to be a reduction in standards, only a constant widening of the recruitment net. An ODI Fellowship remains an esteemed award which stays with the Fellow for life and which reflects favourably on the host ministry.



All this is a paean to the wisdom of the original founders of the Scheme, for though I have taken pains to emphasise how much we have adapted to twenty-first century needs of developing countries and how many innovations we have introduced, the original elements of the Scheme's design (even down to its notoriously challenging selection board) remain valid today. We should be forever grateful to them: it is still a unique Scheme for economists, with no direct equivalent elsewhere.

What of the charge that after so many years technical assistance is self-justifying and self-perpetuating? This is a thought I take so seriously that I regularly subject each new cohort to a seminar on Technical Assistance (TA) in their briefing session, drawing on critiques of TA written by Elliot Berg, and get them to decide whether their tasks as Fellows are as unwanted, biased, donor-imposed and money-making as the conventional criticism of TA would imply. There are also dangers when some ministries (or entire civil services) are so under-funded that they cannot pay proper salaries to the nationals, and begin to rely on the ODI Fellow instead. The Scheme's salvation, I contend, is that it is demand-led (v.supra), that ODI manages it with a very light touch, leaving the employing government in the driving seat and protecting the Fellow from any undue donor-influence (yes, even from those donors which help fund the Scheme), that we never automatically roll forward a post, but always seek fresh justification on the grounds of a capacity building plan and schedule, but above all because after putting our effort in selecting the Fellows and prioritising the most appropriate posts, we let go and trust both the governments and the Fellows themselves. We are rarely left unrewarded. In September 2003, three ODI Fellows were taken in their national delegations to the Cancun WTO ministerials, which itself is emblematic of the trust which builds up between Fellows and their governments. Far from being unproductive, self-perpetuating, a recently-serving Fellow told me while on a placement mission in Africa that because of its hands-off nature based on quality and trust and because of the strong local ownership 'the ODI Fellowship Scheme is the future of technical cooperation' which he hoped other donors would emulate.

What of the last caveat? The assertion repeated in some of the contributions which follow, to the effect that 'I had a fine time in country X, best years of my life, and it helped me build a decent career, but I doubt if I contributed anything to X' (followed by an amusing list of failed ventures s/he had been associated with, from a ranking entry in the list of Great Planning Disasters to a successful attempt to privatise and sell off the national airline, which was subsequently bankrupted and grounded).

I put this down to the great British art of self-disparagement. I know ODI Fellows make massive contributions to their ministries, to their colleagues and to the countries. (I also know half are not British nowadays; I don't hear this from the Latins, the Asians and the Africans). None of this prevents Fellows from benefiting personally, and many are they, including some from the pinnacles of achievement – and in writing – who have told me their ODI Fellowship still represented the best years of their lives. Long may this remain so – so long as they are needed in development.