

ODI FELLOWS: DEVELOPING OR DAMAGING?

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I have now passed my ten month mark on the ODI fellowship scheme. It has been a tremendous experience, and has matched up to my every expectation. It has allowed me to work on projects out of reach to many with my level of experience.

However, an irregular but recurring concern is the extent to which I am a tool for development. At times, this concern becomes a fear that I, and other fellows, could in fact be damaging to the countries progress. In what follows, I think aloud on this subject, allowing me to better clarify my concerns.

An ODI fellow is clearly capacity. The fellow has been chosen for their ability to effectively and efficiently produce results on command, as well as taking the initiative and providing the drive to improve developmental processes and institutions. Placed in developing country governments, the fellow can produce better development outcomes than would have arisen without him/her.

However, there are a number of dangers. Just like public capital flows can marginalise private investment, an ODIs capacity can **impede the capacity development of others**. By taking on key roles in the place of others, the fellow prohibits the home candidate (who would have been chosen instead) from the lessons experience of the role would bring.

Related to this, and possibly a form of it, is that an ODIs superior ability to innovate may **disfigure the incentive structure for innovation** in country, since the ODI innovates beyond all others, and the secondary innovator goes un-rewarded for their efforts.

ODI fellows can also provide the context for **capacity gaps to 'hide' themselves** in the shadow of the ODIs abilities. Institutions and processes may be built up around them, on the understanding that the capacity is there (although perhaps not cognisant of its source) just for them to collapse when the ODI leaves.

There may be issues of **reform ownership**. There is potential that the enthusiasm for reforms will be high in the presence of the ODI, but will wane on their departure. This may leave reforms unfinished, sometimes with a damaging legacy, such as when other structures have been dismantled in preparation for the reform, or if the unfinished project impacts on the thirst for further reform.

Given that many ODIs have limited experience in their host country and have had little professional experience working in a foreign government, **the learning curve may be too moderate to avoid damaging mistakes**. And whilst mistakes happen in every office, the intersection of inexperience and the disproportionate influence the ODI has can lead to unnecessary spoil.

Despite all these problems, ODI fellows continue to be in demand across the globe. Do host country officials not know what is best for their government? It is important

to **be aware of the official's incentive structure**. An ODI is a cost-effective and useful resource that can get the job done. When a host official takes on an ODI, it may be that they are taking a conscious decision to make life easier for themselves, or that they themselves are not aware of the challenges a fellow brings with them.

Finally, to the extent that this can be understood by outsiders, I wonder how much importance a nation will attach to development coming through an 'outsider on the inside', blurring the **lines of ownership of development**. When you are this close the heart, do you not affect the way it beats? Will the owner of the heart care in years to come?

To many of these criticisms there is an answer. On capacity development, it is important to remember that the **ODI introduces a capacity builder into an organisation that might not otherwise have had one**. Thus, the fellow must make sure that s/he builds more capacity than they take with them (or at least the same). Since many ODIs are partly in it for their own capacity building, it then becomes a win-win situation, in which more capacity was built than otherwise would have been, and given that the condition above is met, everyone receives more than they otherwise would have. I would say one should capacity build at every level, since you never know where it can be most effective. One should optimise the spread-depth ratio.

Next is the question as to whether ODI fellows hide capacity. Let me begin by making a further observation on the ODI fellowship. It **provides governments with a bridging device**. Whilst capacity is built elsewhere, the fellow acts as the platform on which that capacity is built. Thus, if the ODI fellow fills in the gaps before they leave, or is simply an interim dam, the main dam will support the flood once they're gone, and now the nation has hydroelectric power. Whilst some villagers are displaced, the nation as a whole is better off! Apologies for the corny analogy.

The impact of other challenges can certainly be minimised **if the fellow is conscious of the issues and puts in place a damage limitation scheme**. If a fellow understands they are driving a reform process, sufficient effort should be put into producing long term commitment and enthusiasm for the project in relevant players or within the institutions themselves. If the ODI fellow is aware that there are major protocol rules not to break, or that there are rules and histories that they do not know about, then they should be conscious of this when they work.

Thinking this through, it seems that an ODI can shape their actions to maximise the capacity building they do, or at least minimise the capacity damage they inflict. However, I have purposefully discussed higher level issues here, and avoided the devil which is the details. Perhaps there are a similar set of guidelines necessary for the details.

Before finishing, I must mention one detail, and that is ego. At times, what is good for the organisation one is working for, and what is good for the fellow may be at odds. For example, heading up the office's involvement in a particular project may be great experience for the fellow, but better for the office if it were done by someone who would be around for the duration. **The fellow must always put first what is best for the office, or even better, the nation**, since they will be rewarded by just

being there, or can gain in other ways. Whilst this doesn't always mean laying one's ego to one side, it often does, or at least temporarily controlling it.

ODI certainly isn't all about capacity building. It's as much about learning and becoming a more able servant of the host country (as well as all other developing nations, and society as a whole) in the future. However, capacity development is a hot topic that often plays on my mind, and I feel that it is one of my main short term aims.