

*This 'How to!' note, is one of a series in which practitioners share technical information about how to tackle a commonly met challenge in market systems development.*

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## How to: use donor-implementer staff secondments to enhance operational effectiveness

Development programming needs to be managed adaptively to ensure that strategies remain relevant and impactful. This necessitates continually learning, experimenting and changing. Operating in this way is enabled by better relationships between donors and implementers, as changes to activities, workplans, targets, and budgets have contractual implications. This how-to note highlights two experiences of staff secondment between donor and implementing organisations with respect to impacts on the donor-implementer relationship. Based on this, we ask if and when staff secondments might be used as a tool to improve that relationship.

### The challenge

Donor and implementing organisations both exist to serve the mission of poverty reduction. They are each, however, subject to constraints and pressures. For example, donors must be able to demonstrate the prudent use of funds to guarantee to their funders – governments and/or the public – that money is being used effectively, but lack operational expertise. Mechanisms to manage this include competitive procurements, predictable work plans and impact logics, regular proof of attributable impact, and strict performance management of contractors. Implementing agencies are subject to different constraints, such as a continually changing operating area, market dynamics, cultural and social differences, short funding horizons, and disincentives to openly report challenges.

These pressures and constraints, while understandable, help create an operating environment where experimentation, learning, and adaptation is very difficult. This can especially hinder the success of programmes that want to create long-term, sustainable change in unpredictable environments. The programmes that succeed in operating in an adaptive manner tend to have favorable donor-implementer relationships: mutual understanding, flexibility, trust, and a willingness to navigate the structures of contracts, evaluation, and bureaucracy together. The challenge, then, is: how might we foster relationships between donor and implementing organisations that enables better cooperation and mutual understanding?

One tool organisations might use to foster productive relationships is staff secondments. After all, there is nothing quite like being in the other party's shoes to incite empathy and understanding. To explore this idea better, BEAM Exchange interviewed two individuals who have been part of secondments between donor and implementing organisations.

### Logistics

#### Who was seconded?

Roman Troxler was a programme officer working on employment, income and market development programming at the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). SDC is the agency within the Swiss government responsible for development assistance. He was seconded to Swisscontact, a major Swiss development implementing agency that focuses on private-sector

development. Specifically, to a programme called Promoting Market Oriented Skills Training and Employment Creation in the Great Lakes Region (PROMOST II) in Rwanda.

Joe Huxley was responsible for strategic partnerships at FSD Africa. FSD Africa promotes inclusive financial sector development in sub-Saharan Africa. It is mandated by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) to be a risk-taking capacity builder and investor in both the retail and capital market fields. It is based in Nairobi and is a Kenyan not-for-profit company. Joe was seconded to the finance team at DFID's headquarters in London.

Roman and Joe were both relatively early in their careers. This resulted in the exchange being low-risk and limited conflicts-of-interest. It also served as an investment in their professional capacity.

### **What was the duration of the secondments?**

Roman's secondment lasted 15 months. Joe's lasted two years, on an 'on and off' basis.

### **Who paid?**

In both cases, the employee's 'mother' organisation continued to pay their salary. There was little-to-no cost share, the exceptions being things like transport costs to and from an assignment and lodging when in the field. This arrangement made the secondments much easier to manage administratively.

### **Past precedent**

Staff secondments are not unheard-of, but they are not common either.

For SDC, this secondment was supported as part of their entry-level staff programme: The Junior Program Officer (JPO) programme, which started over a decade ago. However, most who go through the JPO programme do not undertake secondments with another organisation. For example, out of the 15 JPOs in 2015, only two did secondments with external agencies. Furthermore, not everyone elects to enter SDC through the JPO programme. A prospective SDC employee can apply to the JPO programme, or directly apply to a specific position.

Joe's secondment was not part of any formal programme. It arose out of conversations between DFID's Finance Team and FSD Africa regarding a policy area that DFID wanted further insight into. FSD Africa does not have a formal staff secondment programme at the moment, though the option is being considered as part of their Personal Development Centre.

### **How were the secondments structured?**

Initially, the secondments were built around a tangible product or assignment that held value for at least one of the organisations. In Roman's case, it was the development of an entrepreneurship stream within an existing vocational skills project at Swisscontact. This fit his area of expertise and interest. In Joe's case, it was developing a policy note and recommendations for DFID ministers and officials regarding capital markets programming in Sub-Saharan Africa. DFID wanted intelligence; Joe had the time, contacts and experience. These were starting points; over the course of the secondments, and as trust and efficiencies developed, the scope of each secondment evolved organically as needs arose.

### **Workload and time-split**

The degree to which a seconded employee has responsibilities that span the two organisations will depend on how the secondment is structured. Regardless, this can be a challenge especially in the early stage of a secondment. Navigating it requires patience and clear communication.

Roman was initially expected to spend one day a week on SDC-related work, and four days on the Swisscontact work (though he would be based out of the Swisscontact office full time). All stakeholders involved soon realised that split of attention was not working out, and expectations

were adjusted accordingly. Joe reported that he at times struggled to balance his DFID work with his FSD Africa work, since both organisations would treat him like he was ‘their’ employee. He managed to balance this, however, by regularly and clearly reminding his supervisors at both organisations about his bandwidth. Topics of joint interest also helped, e.g. capital market development in Sub-Saharan Africa, crowdfunding market development in Sub-Saharan Africa, and the UK-Somalia remittance corridor.

## Objectives and incentives

The secondments, in different ways, were structured around two objectives.

### Objective 1: Professional development for the employee

Roman’s secondment was organised under SDC’s Junior Programme Officer programme, and his learning and professional growth was one of its objectives. His manager and him discussed his areas of interest together, and what learning opportunities and placements would benefit his future role in the agency. Similarly, Joe’s arrangement was seen by his manager as an opportunity to invest in Joe’s professional development, and to help him and FSD Africa learn about the internal mechanics of a donor organisation. This emphasis on learning means that both Roman and Joe were being pushed to ask questions and understand the project and organisation they were being seconded to. It also factored into their willingness, interest, and engagement with the secondment assignment.

### Objective 2: Bringing implementation expertise and capacity into the donor organisation

To different extents, both secondments involved a donor organisation wanting to better understand an implementation-related topic. DFID was gathering information to inform their capital markets strategy and thus sought out an organisation (FSD Africa) that could help them do that. FSD Africa was also a relatively new organisation when this secondment happened, and thus this provided an opportunity for DFID to learn about one of its implementing agencies.

In SDC’s case, they supported Roman’s secondment partly because they “realised that a lot of their staff have not worked with implementers before” and they wanted their programme officers to “understand the complexity of implementation.”

The incentives for each of the organisations involved are summarised in the following tables.

	SDC	Swisscontact Rwanda
<b>What they stood to gain</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increased understanding of the realities of implementation</li> <li>- Professional development for Roman</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Expert knowledge on entrepreneurship and the development of a new programme stream</li> </ul>
<b>Costs incurred</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Roman’s salary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Some travel and lodging</li> </ul>

	FSD Africa	DFID
<b>What they stood to gain</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Professional development for Joe</li> <li>- Increased trust and mutual understanding between the two agencies, clarity on DFID’s priorities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Access to additional capacity (human resource, professional networks and expertise)</li> <li>- Greater understanding of implementation mechanisms and challenges</li> </ul>
<b>Costs incurred</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Joe’s salary</li> <li>- Loss of Joe’s time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Security vetting, IT, office space and access, and line management</li> </ul>

## Results of the secondments

Some key outcomes from the secondments are described below.

### **Results toward objective 1: professional development for the employee**

Roman states that the secondment helped him understand the implementation side of development in a way he didn't before as someone at a donor agency. He learned how it is "sometimes more difficult to achieve [even] very small targets than expected," and the importance of mutual understanding between a donor and implementer on what specifically the impact logic means. He also saw how mixed signals regarding priorities from different parts of the donor organisation affected programming, and recognised that the "donor must speak with one voice." These lessons would help him be a better programme officer for SDC when interacting with implementing agencies.

Joe says the experience has made him "more cognizant of DFID people, politics and processes... [it gave] me a better understanding of how development gets done from the donor perspective." He better understands the stresses and strains on "the other side of the fence" and is better able to work to them and around them. This understanding of the "other side" makes Joe more effective as a development professional. "I suspect my boss might now say I perform better as a result of the exposure to DFID HQ," says Joe.

### **Results toward objective 2: bringing implementation knowledge and capacity into the donor organisation**

Roman shared knowledge with SDC throughout his placement during regularly-scheduled check-ins, as well as at the end via an internal debriefing and report. His insight centred on implementation and assessment methodologies for entrepreneurship programming: what works in what context, and his experience putting some of them into practice (e.g., the ILO's Start Your Business framework, and setting up savings groups). He also shared lessons specifically in regards to donor-implementer coordination to help SDC manage their relationships better.

Joe's secondment assignment was initially supposed to last three months. After delivering on his first output, a report on capital market programming, the relationship continued. DFID worked with Joe and the wider FSD Africa team on: capital market development training for Tanzanian professionals with the London Stock Exchange, exploring solutions for safer, less costly remittances flows between the UK and Somalia, and crowd-funding market development options for sub-Saharan Africa. This indicated the value DFID saw in having an implementer perspective at the table during a period of time where its ideas on capital markets programming were exploratory and still in their infancy. Once past the nascent stage, DFID hired full-time capital markets development advisors and began to integrate capital market streams into future programmes.

## Implicit value-add

Roman and Joe report a number of intangible benefits to their secondments that continue to pay dividends beyond the scope of the original assignment.

### **Helping staff at the two organisations understand each other better**

For implementing agencies, interactions with the donor can sometimes feel intimidating due to the inherent power dynamic in the relationship. After the secondment experience, Joe feels comfortable to "more easily pick up the phone, meet and brainstorm" with DFID staff. This enables a flow of information and ideas which can help keep the two parties on the same page. Joe also finds himself in a position where he could "explain some of the DFID perspective to [his] team," and "help [his] boss navigate DFID relationships and processes." In essence, he played the role of a peer advisor on otherwise unseen or less well understood DFID perspectives. His empathy with and understanding of constraints facing the donor organisation enabled more productive relations

between the implementer and the donor. “Sometimes, my position as a secondee allowed FSD Africa and DFID to defuse [delicate] situations more quickly.” Conversely, the secondment helped DFID understand FSD Africa better and enabled them to have more informed conversations about capital market development.

### **Improving professional networks and transparency between donor and implementer staff**

Joe and Roman both saw value in the professional networks the secondments exposed them to. It further enabled the flow of information between donors and implementers on an as-needed basis. Joe and Roman became resources for their colleagues and co-workers by connecting them directly to people in other organisations that would benefit their work. This tightening of the professional networks between disparate staff in the international development industry is in principle a desirable thing as it increases coordination, transparency, and efficiency.

### **Value for money**

SDC and FSD Africa found the secondments to be worth the investment insofar as the professional development opportunity they provided to Joe and Roman: exposure to new thematic areas, clear and demanding goals, diverse professional networks. Both organisations also valued the learning that the secondments garnered with respect to “understanding the other side” – DFID’s donor context and policy environment for FSD Africa, and Swisscontact’s implementer perspective for SDC. That said, both organisations stressed the importance of aligned goals and objectives in making secondments worth the money.

Roman’s placement, being part of the JPO programme, was driven more by professional development than mutual interest and goals. Furthermore, SDC was not able to retain Roman after his contract ended. Roman’s manager, while heavily supportive of secondments as a tool, reflects that, “secondments are costly, if one-way. And very costly, if no appropriate job can be made available inside SDC after a successful secondment.”

Joe’s placement, on the other hand, was born out of more aligned set of incentives between DFID and FSD Africa. His manager saw his contributions to DFID initiatives on capital markets development, Somalia remittance corridors, and the Tanzanian capital markets regulators to be serving FSD Africa’s mission as well. As such, it seemed that Joe was simultaneously working for both organisations, as opposed to being ‘given away’ to one of them.

The shared management responsibility for Joe also played a role in both FSD Africa and DFID seeing value-for-money. According to Joe’s manager at FSD Africa, both organisations realise that, “[seconded staff] get less hand’s-on management attention than regular employees (because they are not seen as ‘belonging’ in the same way as regular employees) and so they need have a very clear sense up front of what’s expected of them. It works best where the receiving organisation, DFID in this case, acknowledges their oversight responsibilities properly – with sensible TORs, performance appraisals, etc. Critical to the success of the secondment was the fact that Joe had several very discrete pieces of work to focus on, as well as the flexibility from both the institutions and the individuals involved to make it work. We ensured that objectives were fully aligned between FSD Africa and DFID, with clear timelines for delivery.”

### **Going forward**

Improving the donor-implementer relationship across the industry is desirable, especially if we want better alignment between policies and implementation needs, and for programmes to be more creative and adaptive. The institutional constraints that impact both donors and implementers are not going away anytime soon. Thus, the ability to work together within constraints will rely heavily on the quality of the relationship. Staff secondments are one tool that merits more attention in improving those relationships.

The examples above illustrate that secondments can vastly improve information flow, cooperation, and mutual understanding between donor and implementing organisations. This is both in terms of explicit objectives of secondments (i.e., professional development, tangible outputs, insight into the other organisation), as well as implicit benefits (i.e., better empathy for each others' constraints, willingness to communicate freely, more connected and transparent professional networks). It remains a question how we might measure value-for-money of secondments. Certain factors, such as aligned work objectives between the organisations, appear to be critical factors in improving value for money. Other questions remain, and are context-dependent, such as: when should secondments be cost-shared? When does it make more sense for employees to split their time between the organisations?

The two examples in this note provide some food-for-thought. Further work needs to be done to understand how to structure and create value from staff secondments, and on how to structure them for maximal value. We would love to hear more from people who have been part of secondments; please get in touch if you'd like to share your experience with us!



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