

Learning from the Oxford Policy Fellowship: emerging policy messages from a year of data

Embedded technical assistance (TA) has long been a model for support to government institutions in low- and middle-income countries. It is often seen as comparatively better positioned to develop capacity compared to short-term ‘fly in, fly out’ types of support. However, despite its established role in international development assistance, we know little about the underlying dynamics that make embedded TA a success or a failure in developing capacity and improving organisational performance.

The Oxford Policy Fellowship (OPF) has developed a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) framework and a set of monitoring tools that aim to address this knowledge gap by focusing on the process as well as results. This brief provides an outline of the OPF MEL Framework. It describes our four tools and how they measure different aspects of the OPF results chain. The brief also provides an initial analysis of the first year of data, covering both the results achieved to date, as well as the process whereby these results were achieved. Following the analysis, the brief concludes with a number of policy messages. These messages are summarised below.

Key policy messages for governments, donors and embedded advisers:

- Use MEL to capture not only the achievement of results but also the details of the process leading to them.
- Rethink recruitment priorities. Technical excellence is important, but professional versatility, political savviness and social skills also matter a great deal.
- Allow flexibility in the scope of work and appreciate ‘non-technical’ impact.
- Use MEL data to improve preparation and induction programmes for future embedded advisers.
- Refine and prioritise institution scoping and approach partnerships as more than a one-off transaction.
- Approach capacity development with more nuance, vision and attention to politics and culture. Find synergies and avoid conflicts between short-term gap-filling and longer-term capacity development.
- Recognise that capacity development often happens through informal modes of interaction: nurture these practices and question whether formal training is always an appropriate model for skills transfer.

Introduction

The OPF provides governments with outstanding early-career law and public policy advisers for two years, to build long-term local capacity and provide immediate gap-filling support. By providing government partners with key support they themselves have defined, networks to enhance the effectiveness of that support, and a rigorous approach to MEL, the Fellowship is piloting a new model for delivering sustainable and locally owned development impact.

Embedded technical advisers are a unique kind of support, in that they work directly for the governments they seek to support. This usually means physically going to a government building and working with teams of civil servants and other development practitioners to achieve the shared goals of the donor that is funding the support and of the host government. This also means that embedded advisers are often placed in host institutions with little internal support, supervision or accountability, and with minimal structures in place for systematic external support and MEL. The everyday process whereby capacity development happens thus remains a mystery for people not directly involved in the process.

When programmes end and embedded advisers move on to new assignments, a wealth of learning opportunities are lost due to insufficient MEL. Results are sometimes captured, but the process of how these are achieved remains a black box.

The OPF MEL Framework

The OPF has developed a MEL Framework that aims to seize this lost learning opportunity by capturing not only the achievement of results but also the process leading to them. The MEL Framework maps out the Fellowship's theory of change (see Figure 1) and a set of tools track different parts of the chain: from inputs and activities to outputs and outcomes (see Figure 2).

It takes time for successful development interventions to translate into changes in behaviour and improved development outcomes. For this reason, the OPF MEL Framework focuses as much on the process as on the final results. Gordon Brown famously noted that 'in establishing the rule of law, the first five centuries are always the hardest'. Half a millennium may not always be necessary for change to happen, but results do often take a long time to materialise. Improved performance of an organisation and the resulting improvement in service delivery to citizens may not happen within the lifetime of a particular Fellowship posting. **Some of the OPF MEL tools therefore capture the process whereby inputs (e.g. a Fellow's time) and activities (e.g. on-the-job training on investment contract review) produce results.** Other tools measure the results (outputs) achieved through this process (e.g. improved capacity to review contracts) and attempt to gauge the changes in organisational and individual performance that ensue (outcomes). The tools have been tested during the Fellowship's pilot phase. Adjustments and refinements have been made to ensure data relevance, validity and reliability.

Figure 1: The OPF theory of change

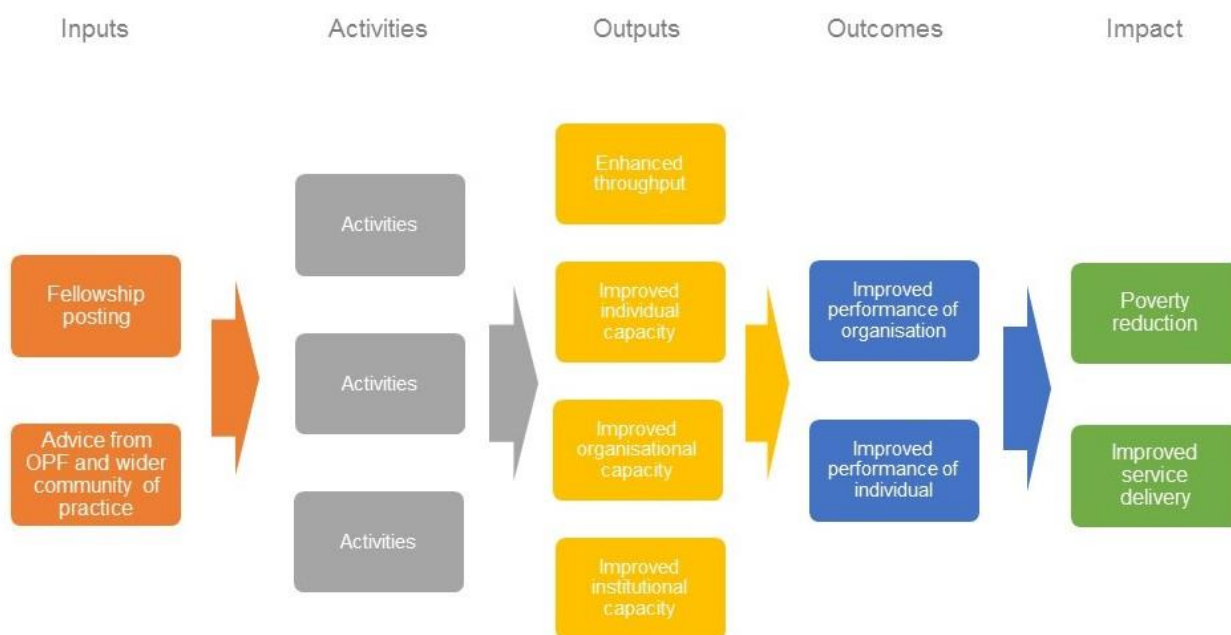
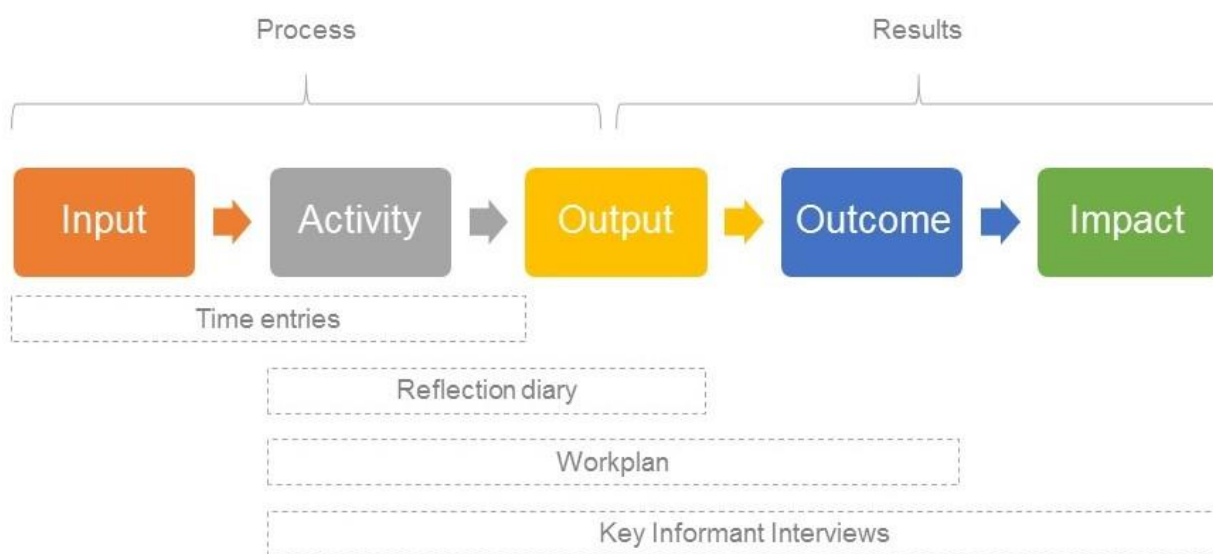


Figure 2: Measuring the theory of change



1. **Time entries** provide us with systematic quantitative data on how Fellows spend their time. We attach different types of information to each time entry, which allows us to break down Fellows' work into multiple dimensions. This gives us a systematic snapshot and time series overview of how embedded TA actually works in practice, and how the nature of work changes over time and varies between different types of institutions.
2. **Reflection diaries** are a qualitative reflexive exercise carried out regularly by each Fellow. These diaries push Fellows to reflect frankly on important themes and dilemmas that they encounter in their work. The diaries help us understand the

challenges, opportunities and dilemmas that Fellows face in their everyday work – including how they manage (or fail) to achieve results; they allow us to identify institutional features that make a posting more or less likely to succeed; they enable us to improve the way we support Fellows in the future; and they help us identify key interpersonal and problem-solving skills needed for embedded advisers to succeed.

3. **The workplan** was introduced six months into the pilot phase as a tool to help Fellows and their host institutions reflect on and strategically plan for how to make the best use of their time. In the workplan, Fellows and their supervisors identify a number of strategic results that they want to achieve and plan the activities required to achieve these results. Indicators help everyone to stay on track and to adjust course when necessary. These indicators also measure the achievement of results. Workplans are developed around three months into the assignment and are reviewed biannually.
4. **Key informant interviews** (KIIs) are undertaken periodically with each Fellow, as well as with their line managers and work colleagues. The KIIs provide qualitative insights into how the posting is working out, and facilitate the in-person interaction that is necessary for an honest and intimate partnership to develop between all parties. The KIIs also allow for OPF staff to investigate whether results are being achieved and whether these are likely to lead to the desired outcomes. The KIIs are semi-structured, with formats developed in response to other evidence generated through the MEL framework.

Findings: A year of data

What types of results are being achieved?

Generally, Fellows contribute to two types of results. First, Fellows contribute to immediate improvements in the throughput of the partner institution by doing work – for example, performing certain tasks such as contract review or advisory services during investment negotiations (we call this gap-filling). This work may sometimes have lasting positive effects on the partner institution and wider society, for instance, by ensuring a good deal between the government and a foreign investor. At other times, however, Fellows will perform one-off assignments with little long-term impact on the organisation's performance, such as proof-reading a report or drafting a briefing note for a supervisor with no involvement of colleagues.

Fellows also develop various types of capacity. Fellows facilitate the transfer of skills and knowledge to colleagues in areas such as public–private partnerships and bilateral investment treaties (technical capacity), and they improve their colleagues' abilities to perform tasks such as drafting and reviewing reports, using the internet to conduct research, and using the Microsoft Office suite (functional capacity). The transfer of skills will sometimes happen through formal training sessions. More often, however, skills transfer occurs through informal day-to-day collaboration between a Fellow and their colleagues. Furthermore, Fellows contribute to improvements in organisational and institutional capacity. New contract review templates are an example of the former, while the development of new policies and legislation (still being finalised) are examples of the latter.

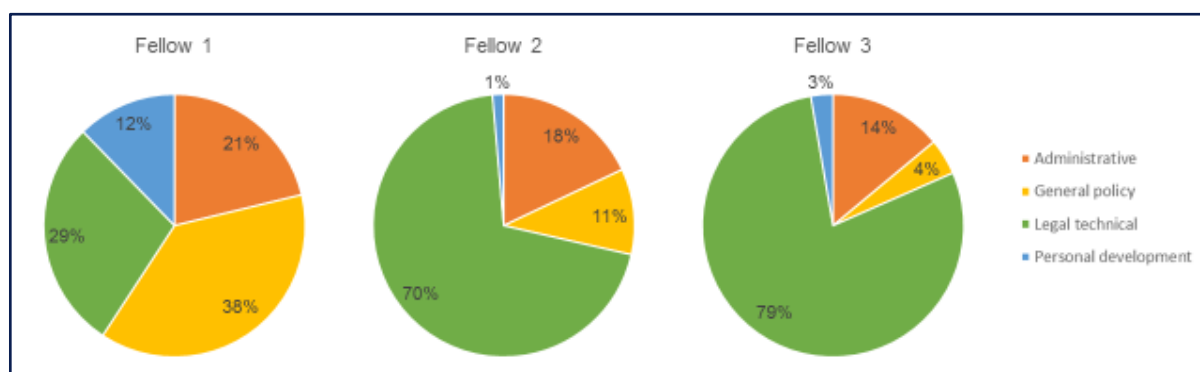
Process

Keeping track of, and learning from, ‘the process’ is an important part of the OPF MEL as results may take time to materialise. Furthermore, capacity development is a process-oriented concept. It describes the process by which people, organisations and society as a whole create, strengthen and maintain their capacity over time.¹ Any MEL framework that attempts to measure capacity development and understand how it happens therefore has to take account of the process, rather than just the end-result. Lastly, a process-oriented MEL framework allows for better management of the OPF because it provides a continuous flow of information that enables better and faster responses to the risks, challenges and opportunities that arise during implementation.

This section provides a short overview of some of the process-focused insights that emerge from the OPF MEL tools. These insights are useful for understanding how change happens, how the process of capacity development unfolds, as well as how embedded TA initiatives can better support these processes. The information provided below is a reflection of one year of data collection from our pilot Fellows. Given the early stage of the programme, we have more data on the ‘process’ than on the ‘results’. The quantitative data reveal three interesting observations and a range of insights materialise from the qualitative tools.

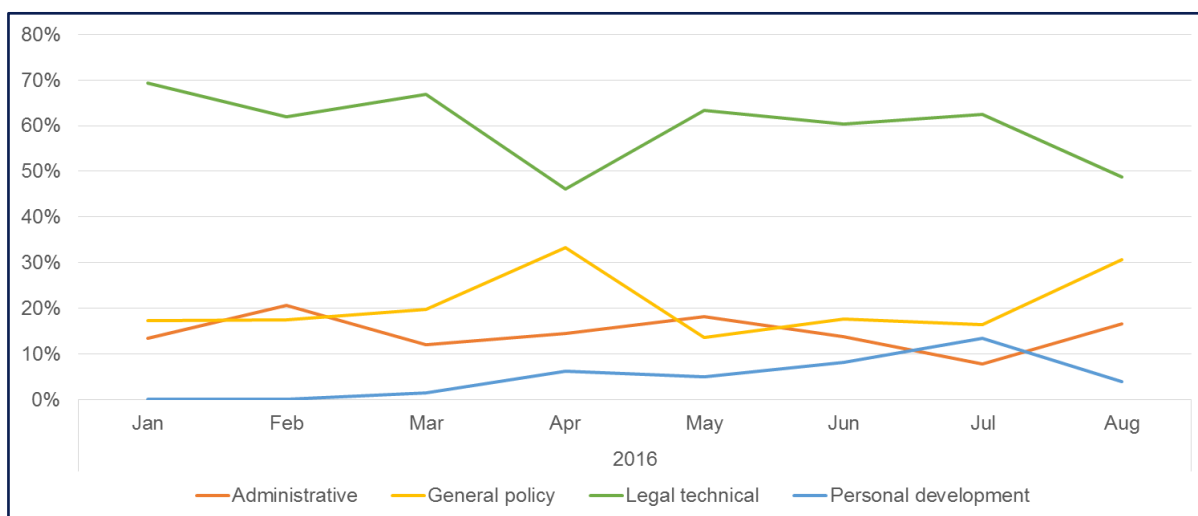
Legal work is one part of a Fellow’s job and its share varies between postings and over time. Fellows may often need to take on tasks outside of their area of expertise in order to address urgent needs in the organisation and to build the relationships and trust with colleagues that are prerequisites for getting more work and developing colleagues’ capacity.

Figure 3: Breakdown of each Fellow’s work as % share of a Fellow’s total time



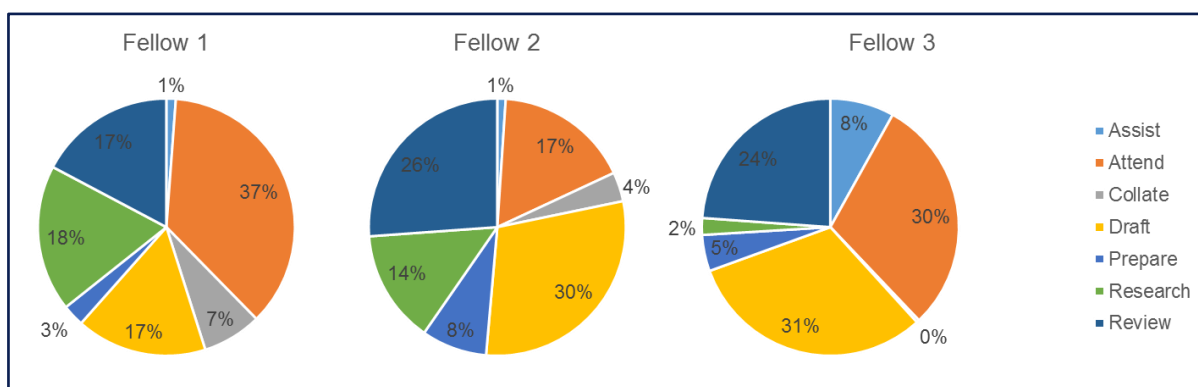
¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2006) *The Challenge of Capacity Development. Working Towards Good Practice*, Paris: OECD.

Figure 4: Breakdown of Fellows' work as % share of total time (total, monthly)



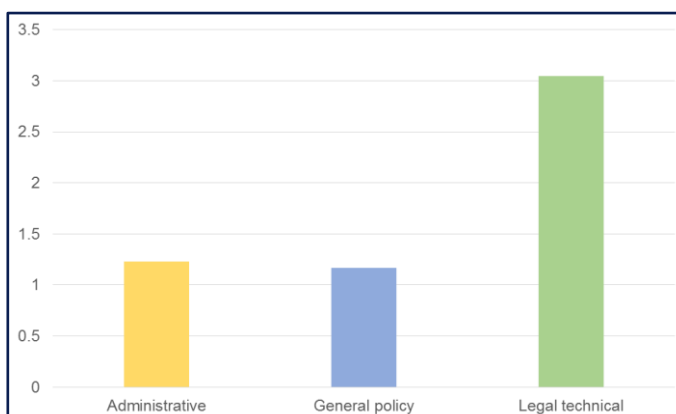
There is also variation in how each Fellow works, though meetings and drafting activities are predominant across postings.

Figure 5: Breakdown of Fellows' work in seven categories (% share of total time)



Our Fellows help develop capacity but our annual conference revealed that only a small part of that development happens through formal arrangements, such as training sessions. During the first 12 months our Fellows only labelled around 3% of their time as capacity development. However, capacity is often developed in informal and *ad hoc* ways that was not captured by the initial MEL tools. Moving forward, we have adjusted our MEL Framework to capture this through a three-pronged focus on formal

Figure 6: Categorisation of Fellows' capacity development activities by thematic area (number of hours)



(training sessions), informal (on-the-job, mentoring) and product-based (tools, templates, and procedures) aspects of capacity development.

Qualitative insights from reflection diaries, KIIs and conversations from our annual conference complement the statistics above. Key insights are discussed below. While some of these may seem common sense, they are important and are often overlooked in the design and implementation of embedded TA interventions:

- **No two institutions are alike:** Partner institutions are unique. They vary in terms of sector and mandate and existing capacity levels, and they face a diverse set of demands within different operating environments. Consequently, Fellows face different working conditions, opportunities and constraints in their work.
- **People matter:** Good relationships are a precondition for impact. Capacity development, for instance, requires a certain level of trust and for people to be comfortable with admitting weaknesses and shortcomings. All Fellows have been keenly aware of this and have gone to great length to build relationships, including learning local languages and socialising with colleagues outside of work.
- **Office politics cannot be ignored:** Fellows have to develop an understanding of the existing dynamics between colleagues, and an ability to navigate these dynamics in a nuanced and sensitive way. It takes time to learn about the history of an institution and the people within it. Existing relationships and past conflicts affect the current performance of a team and the likely success of a Fellow's support to this team.
- **Navigate deeply rooted attitudes and inert institutions:** Ingrained habits, beliefs and modes of operation in an organisation constrain the extent to which change is possible.² Embedded advisers have to take account of, navigate and – if possible – influence these constraints when they provide legal advice and support or launch new reform initiatives in order to ensure uptake and sustainable impact.
- **Having work to do is not a given:** Some Fellows found it difficult to find work when they first arrived in their host institution. Though this is fairly normal for many embedded 'experiences', it was something that Fellows had to come to terms with individually. Fellows had to adopt a patient attitude and avoid getting frustrated, while at the same time seizing opportunities and showing initiative when appropriate.
- **Manage expectations:** Fellows have faced a number of challenges with regards to the type of work they are asked to perform. On some occasions the work has not corresponded to expectations, e.g. by not being legal work or not being 'high-level' enough. At other times, Fellows have been asked to do work that they have not been qualified to do. It has been important for Fellows to manage their counterparts' expectations and their own risk of professional liability; it has been difficult for some to balance 'caution' with the desire to establish themselves as a go-to resource for support.
- **The Fellowship design and execution is not enough to ensure impact:** The success of a Fellowship posting is to a great degree dependent on a number of factors beyond the control of the Fellowship and the Fellow. For example, positive impact is unlikely if colleagues or supervisors in the partner institution lack motivation or incentives to change

² See Paul Collier (2016) 'The cultural foundations of economic failure: A conceptual toolkit', *Journal of Economic Behaviour and Organization*, 126(B), pp. 5–24; Peter A. Hall and Rosemary C. R. Taylor (1996) 'Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms', *Political Studies*, XLIV, pp. 936–957; Paul Pierson (2000) 'Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics', *American Political Science Review*, 94(2), pp. 251–267.

behaviour.³ The impact of a Fellowship posting also relies on there being a certain level of pre-existing capacity. Basic English language skills are, for instance, a necessary condition for a new English language contract review template to be effective.

Policy messages for governments, donors and embedded advisers

The OPF's MEL Framework provides a unique look into the nuts and bolts of embedded TA and the everyday challenges facing public institutions in low- and middle-income countries. With only one year of data we are cautious about making sweeping generalisations. However, our data are already outlining the contours of a number of trends and hypotheses relevant for donors, as well as embedded advisers and the governments hosting them:

- **Rethink recruitment priorities.** Technical excellence is important, but professional versatility, political savviness and social skills matter a great deal. Technical abilities, such as legal skills, are important, but technical work is only part of what an embedded adviser does on a day-to-day basis. Embedded advisers tend to work with a wide range of issues and in a variety of ways. This calls for the recruitment of people who are professionally versatile, flexible and entrepreneurial. Language skills, patience, good situational awareness, and the ability to build relationships and respond most appropriately and tactfully in a situation are key to success. The importance of such 'fingerspitzengefühl'⁴ should be acknowledged in recruitment: recruitment systems and tools should be refined to capture these characteristics. Furthermore, induction and implementation support structures for new advisers should make sure to nurture and further develop the necessary skill sets. Drawing on our MEL system and the wider expertise in Oxford Policy Management, the OPF has prioritised this in the past year.
- **Better preparation and induction for advisers:** Knowledge about how embedded advisers work and what they work on should be used to better prepare advisers before and during a deployment. For instance, information from time entries about how advisers are likely to work can be used to improve the relevance of pre-deployment induction training. The same type of information can also be utilised to identify learning resources relevant for advisers' particular areas and methods of work. During a posting, MEL information can thus help optimise the efficiency and impact of advisers' day-to-day activities.
- **Allow for flexibility and appreciate 'non-technical' impact:** A considerable part of the capacity impact that embedded advisers have is likely to be in non-technically specific areas of work that help make the partner institution run more efficiently. Governments and embedded advisers should recognise the importance of these 'functional capacities' and monitor the ways in which embedded support affects them. Similarly, funding agencies should acknowledge that there is value in embedded TA that is not 'technically' sophisticated or strictly within the intended technical focus area of the TA programme. Allowing this flexibility will enable advisers to address emerging or inconspicuous capacity needs that are not identified up front.

³ For a discussion of the role of civil servant motivation in public service delivery see Julian Le Grand (2010) 'Knights and Knaves Return: Public Service Motivation and the Delivery of Public Services, *International Public Management Journal*, 13(1), pp. 56–71.

⁴ A German term that literally means 'finger tips feeling'. It describes a great situational awareness, and the ability to respond most appropriately and tactfully.

- **Refine and prioritise institution scoping:** The success of embedded TA hinges on factors beyond the immediate control of the particular support initiative. Such factors include staff motivation, existing capacity levels in the partner institution and the political incentives facing senior decision-makers, as well as the wider power-political and institutional environment within which the partner institution operates. Embedded TA may sometimes not be the right type of support. Realising this in good time requires investment in pre-support dialogue with potential partner institutions to ensure that the right type of support – if any – is provided to achieve results and avoid doing harm. Scoping and screening tools should be developed and refined to help an embedded TA programme identify the most promising partner institutions.
- **Approach capacity development with more nuance and vision. Balance short-term needs with long-term aspirations.** Embedded advisers and their host institutions face a simultaneous pressure to get things done but also to build capacity in the longer run. These two imperatives can undermine each other. An adviser may perform line functions in isolation, thereby taking away work and responsibilities from national staff. This may in the longer term do more harm than good. Advisers may also end up being used to perform such a broad range of tasks that little sustainable impact is achieved in any of them. Sometimes advisers function as ‘fire extinguishers’ – the default ‘quick fixer’ for urgent tasks identified by the senior leadership. Each adviser, the particular TA programme as a whole, and the development community in general have to balance these different priorities with the longer term but less urgent need for capacity development. It is not sufficient simply to downgrade the gap-filling activities and attempt to squeeze them out, as they in themselves may constitute a much-needed increase in a unit’s capacity to deal with essential tasks in the short term. There is a need for a contextually sensible distribution of efforts between gap-filling and capacity development activities and efforts should be made to ensure synergies rather than conflicts. This requires an ongoing, honest and strategically focused dialogue between partners about what they would like to achieve and what needs to be done to get there.
- **Capacity development beyond ‘training’:** Capacity development is all too often treated as synonymous with formal classroom-style training. Complementary approaches, such as coaching and mentoring, on-the-job training and peer-learning tend to be underappreciated, despite their comparative advantages in transferring certain types of skills or knowledge. In embedded TA programmes, government managers, development partners and advisers should appreciate that capacity development often happens through informal modes of interaction, and that embedded support is well-positioned for this type of support. These complementary modes should be encouraged and nurtured by programme staff and government managers before and during implementation. It may often be necessary for TA programmes to help partners question whether formal training is always an appropriate and effective model for skills transfer.⁵

Moving forward

Systematic and innovative MEL is an invaluable and under-utilised instrument for improving embedded TA in ways that makes it more relevant to partners’ needs, more effective in

⁵ This point is not new but it is unfortunately often overlooked. See OECD (2011) *Training and Beyond: Seeking Better Practices for Capacity Development*, OECD Development Co-operation Working Papers, No. 1, OECD Publishing; United Nations Development Programme (2008), *Practice Note: Capacity Development*, New York.

supporting change and more adaptive in the face of changing opportunities and constraints. Better MEL on this type of intervention can also help governments and development partners to better understand what drives institutional change in low capacity settings, how capacity development actually happens and how to measure it, and what types of personality characteristics and non-technical skills to look for when recruiting advisers.

The OPF strives to use learning to continuously improve the programme – including the tools and procedures that we use to identify partner governments and recruit new Fellows. We also see great potential in MEL to inform our understanding of where, when and how capacity is developed, as well as when and how behaviour change and reform happens. Moving forward, we hope to engage with likeminded people, programmes and institutions in order to generate some innovative thinking about how we can all do things differently to improve the way in which we support low- and middle-income countries in achieving their development goals.

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