



Life as a Fellow: Romilly Greenhill, Senior Economist, Jubilee Research at the New Economics Foundation, London (Now at ActionAid)

Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, Uganda, 1999–2001

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Being invited as both a representative of the ‘younger generation’ and the NGO sector is quite a responsibility! Unlike other contributors/speakers, it is less than two years since I finished my posting, in the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development in Uganda. I’m an NGO representative because, unusually for a former ODI Fellow I believe, I now work for an NGO – specifically, for Jubilee Research at the New Economics Foundation, one of the official UK successors to the international Jubilee 2000 campaign.

When thinking about this presentation, I asked myself: 40 years on, is the ODI Fellowship scheme still relevant? I thought about what I hope I contributed to Uganda, and about the lessons that I have taken with me to my new job. I concluded that yes, the scheme is definitely still relevant today. While I have to admit that what I gave to Uganda is probably less than what I received, in terms of knowledge and experience, this doesn’t mean that the scheme is not important. For what I learnt during my posting is now helping me in my current job, advocating more debt relief for poor countries – including for Uganda itself, which, perhaps unsurprisingly I often use as an example in lobbying meetings.

But most importantly, what did I give to Uganda? To some extent, I brought in relatively basic skills, including the use of Microsoft excel. My job was to manage, on a day to day basis, the Ugandan Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF.) This involved running a complex set of inter-linked spreadsheets, and producing, often at very short notice, different scenarios for the budget over the medium term. For example, I was asked questions like: if we increase the budget deficit, how much more could we spend on education? How can we cut the budget by \$10m (a lot in Ugandan terms) without undermining basic services or cutting wages in real terms? If we cut counterpart spending on donor projects, will this jeopardise aid flows? All of this required keeping the spreadsheets up to date, and preparing accurate forecasts of spending under different scenarios. Not an easy task, and would have been almost impossible for anyone unfamiliar with excel.

As well as actually doing this work, moreover, I also trained my Ugandan colleagues in managing the MTEF. I did a lot of basic excel training, and wrote a manual on the MTEF and the budget process for use as a reference document after I left. I also helped my line manager to streamline the budget process to make it an easier one. When I arrived, I found my Ugandan colleagues extremely over-stretched, having to work long hours, under great pressure. We managed to find ways of improving the co-ordination of the process and making everyone’s life a bit easier.

The other reform that I helped put in place was to increase the linkages between the budget allocations in the MTEF and Uganda’s priorities as articulated in the PEAP – Uganda’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper. The PEAP was an excellent document, prepared in a relatively participatory way, which took into account research into the needs of the poor through exercises such as the Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Project (UPPAP.) Yet translating the priorities of the PEAP into actual budget allocations was no easy task. One of my roles was therefore to make proposals on these allocations, based on key PEAP priorities. For example, the 2001/02 budget, which I worked on before I left, achieved significant increases in spending on health and water – key PEAP priorities, which had until that point been under-funded.

We were also involved in communicating the budget and budget process in order to make them more transparent to civil society and the general public within Uganda. I prepared a ‘Glance at the Budget’



document which showed, in easily accessible way, how much the government was spending on each sector. Asked to contribute to a 'Citizens Guide to the Budget Process' which aimed to explain to people how the government allocated their money, my limited knowledge of the country meant that I needed help from my Ugandan colleagues to do this. For example, I needed some persuasion that presenting data in the form of graphs was not sufficiently accessible, and that instead, I should represent growing budget allocations as a set of trees increasing in size. My economist brain found this a little hard to handle!

Finally, another key area of my work was in the area of budget monitoring and accountability. Although I'm not an accountant, I prepared 'budget performance reports' which looked at how much the government was spending on each area compared to budget allocations. We then prepared publicly available reports as to where the money was being spent, and why allocations had deviated from the budget. Unfortunately, actual releases were still not as close to budget allocations as they should have been in Uganda, and so hopefully the publication of these reports helped to improve the budget process.

So, all in all I hope that I was useful to Uganda, and that I transferred some skills to my Ugandan colleagues. Of course, my role was not without its problems. As my overall income was between 10 and 20 times the salary of my colleagues at similar levels to me, I was acutely aware that it could probably have employed 4 Ugandans at up to 5 times their current wage, and I sometimes wondered if this would not have been a more effective use of resources. Similarly, the Ugandan Finance Ministry sometimes felt like it was being run on the external side by technical advisors, including many more senior than I. I sometimes observed rather ironically that when IMF and World Bank missions came to visit, there were more African faces on their side of the table than on ours!

So I hope that I contributed something to Uganda. Conversely, what did I get out of it? Quite a lot, it seems, both personally and professionally. In particular, the experience has been really invaluable in terms of my current job.

First of all, it has really helped me to be motivated to keep lobbying for debt relief for the poorest countries. I'm fully aware that Uganda has in some senses been a 'star pupil' in terms of the World Bank and IMF's Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) initiative – it was the first country to get debt relief under this initiative, for example, and has been one of the pioneers in demonstrating that debt relief funds are being properly used (partly, it must be said, as a result of the efforts of former ODI Fellows.) But this notwithstanding, it was clear that Uganda was really benefiting from debt relief. Education spending was going up, children were going to school. Roads were being built. Although my work was very Kampala-based, and didn't often take me into rural or poor areas, the benefits of such spending were obvious just from my travels. So this has helped me feel inspired to call for more debt relief for Uganda and others and to spread this enthusiasm to other people. My job involves some public speaking, and I often tell people about my observations on Uganda and this has, I hope, helped to motivate them to campaign for more debt relief for poor countries.

Secondly, my ability to lobby for better aid procedures and more debt relief has been strengthened by my understanding of what it is like to be on the receiving end of some donor policies. For others, terms like PRSPs, PRGFs, PPAs, PRSCs etc may be just a set of acronyms (as they may well be for many readers!) But for me, such things were a part of everyday life for two years. I really learnt what it meant to negotiate for a loan from the World Bank, or monitor conditionalities under an IMF programme. To take one example: I often lobby for debt relief as a more effective form of resource transfer than aid, on the grounds that it is more transparent, predictable, flexible and has lower transactions costs. I do this because I know what it is like to try to co-ordinate hundreds of donor projects with separate reporting frameworks; to budget over the medium term when you have no idea what your donor aid flows (which constitute 50% of the budget) will be; to keep several donors with different sectoral priorities happy. This experience of being on the receiving end of donor conditionalities and aid programmes – of really sitting on the Ugandan side of the table – is something which I think is unique to the ODI Fellowship experience.

On a lighter note, I think there was also much to be gained in Uganda in terms of cross-cultural understanding. I got very used to being different, being a 'mzungu' (white person) including once being described by the Ugandan Finance Minister in a Ministerial meeting as 'totally white.' Now, I deal with people from all countries and can sometimes have to plunge into a meeting in say, South Africa, an hour after getting off the plane. After Uganda, I no longer feel different, or uncomfortable, dealing with people from all over the world. In fact whenever I go back to Africa it reminds me of Uganda, which makes me feel quite at home.



And of course, Uganda was not all about work. Living in the country was a rewarding experience – I joined a local choir, sailed on Lake Victoria, travelled to national parks and climbed mountains, and generally experienced all that the country had to offer. While there were lonely moments too, far away from home, I'm sure I'm a richer person because of it. I just hope that I left Uganda a little richer, too.