

# Change in challenging contexts

The role and behaviour of external actors

Tim Williamson

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# Introduction

How can external actors support reformers to deliver genuine change in challenging contexts? This brief sets out potential roles of donors and providers of technical assistance (TA) in supporting reform, and factors likely to increase the uptake of support. It then examines how the behaviour of donors and the structure of their TA programmes can undermine or reinforce genuine change processes.

This briefing is part of a lesson-learning exercise conducted by ODI's Budget Strengthening Initiative (BSI). BSI is an innovative and experimental programme to support fragile and conflict-affected states to build more effective, transparent and accountable budget systems. The brief draws from BSI experience working in South Sudan, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda and with the g7+ group of fragile states.

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# Four roles played by external support in genuine change

BSI experience demonstrates the importance in change processes of: iterative problem solving; building coalitions to support reforms; learning and adaptation to maintain the relevance of reform; sensitivity to the available reform space and capacity to implement; consistent implementation of reforms over time; and the building of complementarity and coherence across reform processes and associated systems. Approaches that showed elements of these features tended to result in genuine behavioural change that will lead to improvements in public financial management (PFM). External actors formed an integral part of reform processes, playing four main roles:

## 1. The trusted adviser

**(Strategic thinking, problem solving, navigation)**

External actors who gain the trust of reformers can play a critical role by helping them to understand and address problems and navigate reform processes and the multiplicity of advice from different quarters. A trusted adviser needs to strike a balance between providing coaching and mentoring, and the actual provision of technical advice. Often, trusted advisers within ministries play a gate-keeper role. The trusted adviser needs to ensure that he or she is regarded as objective and impartial in interactions with other advisers and bureaucrats. Other advisers need to work through, not in competition with, the trusted adviser.

## 2. The facilitator

**(Brokering agreements)**

External advisers and donors can facilitate reform processes and associated learning and adaptation. In doing so, they can help reformers to build coalitions in support of reform. They can also help to broker agreements between

different actors with different interests in the reform process. This can be at either the strategic (political) or technical level, or both. Facilitators can build coalitions across TA providers and donors too, which is valuable in helping to avoid destructive competition between them.

## 3. The dot-joiner

**(Coherence and complementarity of reform)**

Advisers and donor representatives can help to connect reform processes and systems. They can help to identify and maximise opportunities for complementarity and consistency, and can help to support the integration of systems and processes from behind the scenes. They can also support and encourage collaboration among different actors supporting different change processes.

## 4. The technician

**(Supporting implementation, building capacity)**

TA programmes also play the important and conventional role of technical support in the development, delivery and management of processes and systems and in the building of capacity over time. PFM systems need a budget-preparation process, a payment process, associated IT systems, guidelines, manuals and training. Effective external support helps to start them on the right foot and sustain them. It should also evolve, from design and implementation, to management and provision of on-the-job support, and finally to back-stopping. Implementation support is key, ensuring consistent execution of reforms over time. Technical solutions must be relevant to problems and sensitive to capacity and the political space for reform, and they should be adapted and adjusted over time.



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# The uptake of advice

External advice is not always taken up, and systems may not be implemented or sustained. Although often difficult to pin down, there appear to be several factors that influence the degree to which advice is taken up:

- Usefulness of advisers. The person or people being advised need to see the relevance of the advice to the problems they face, and also the feasibility of acting on the advice. The person providing advice needs to demonstrate technical knowledge, for which there is no substitute. This also requires communication skills, including the ability to explain problems, and to link advice to lessons and past experience.
- Building trust with counterparts. Advisers need to show respect to the people being advised, acknowledging their position and authority. It is important that advisers work through the bureaucracy, rather than bypassing it, and respect the decisions of their counterparts. Confidentiality may be important in building trust,

which also takes time. Balancing direct technical advice with listening and coaching is important.

- Consistency of advisers over the long term. The person or people providing advice need to sustain their engagement over the long term to ensure consistency in the change processes and implementation support, learning with the team and broader coalition, and supporting adaptation, ensure there is consistency in the change processes and in implementation support. It will also ensure that advisers join with the team and broader coalition in learning from the implementation and will support future adaptation.

The importance of sustained optimism (tempered by realistic expectations) will be familiar to those working in fragile environments. While technical ability might be evident, the ability of an individual adviser to build trust is typically intangible and un-measurable. But it is ultimately very important.

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# Donor behaviour and incentives

The environment in which TA providers work is heavily influenced by the behaviour of their funders and the incentives they face. Typically, donors are rewarded if their programmes are visible and they can demonstrate clear influence and results. For TA projects, results need to be defined at the design phase results need to be defined for

TA projects, and activities pre-planned. There are strong incentives to ensure that logframes and workplans are delivered, but few incentives to acknowledge mistakes and therefore learn from them. The combination of the structure of traditional TA projects and the behaviour of donors can have significant negative consequences (Table 1).

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**Table 1: Changing donor behaviour and possible consequences**

Observed donor behaviour	Consequences
Trying to maximise donor influence by talking to ministers and top-level bureaucrats.	Ministers and top-level bureaucrats bombarded with conflicting ideas and recommendations on which they are unable to act.
Maximising visibility, by requiring TA providers to highlight their support.	This may undermine local ownership of reform processes and discourage collaboration.
Praising good practices from elsewhere and encouraging TA providers to implement them.	Discourages TA providers from identifying and addressing local problems faced by counterparts.
Focusing on results from TA providers as defined ex-ante in project logframes and workplans.	Discourages TA providers from acknowledging mistakes and from supporting adaptation and learning with counterparts.
Requesting information on progress within ministries from TA providers.	Undermines the ability of TA providers to build trust with counterparts.
Expecting dramatic improvements in outcomes over the short term.	Encourages counterparts and TA providers to plan for grand solutions that are unlikely to work.
Short-term funding horizons and abrupt halting of institutional support as a result of contextual factors.	Disrupts reform processes, particularly the implementation of processes and systems TA providers may be designing, delivering and/or managing.

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# The structure and behaviour of TA providers

Conventional TA projects are typically structured in one of three ways:

- Multiple contractors implementing individual tasks procured, monitored and coordinated by a management unit
- A single contracted firm or consortium of firms implementing an entire TA project
- An international organisation, or organisation closely affiliated to the donor, providing TA.

Donor behaviour affects all these types of TA project. Donors often have rigid designs, encouraging adherence to detailed logframes, terms of reference and associated workplans. They have a tendency to work in silos, delivering in their respective areas but with little incentive to join the dots. Where the mandates of TA providers overlap, this can result in conflict and competition rather than collaboration.

In addition, TA providers may be required to report back regularly on potentially confidential issues, which can undermine trust. While TA programmes implemented by an international organisation may be more flexible, there is often a detrimental perception that advisers report to their employers, rather than to their government counterparts.

Nonetheless, conventional TA providers act as technicians and (often) trusted advisers, and are frequently effective supporters of genuine change processes. ODI-BSI plays these traditional roles and, unlike many conventional TA providers, has also been facilitator and dot-joiner. The mid-term evaluation of BSI (Cox and Robson, 2013), pointed out that it was BSI's problem-solving approach that set it apart from other TA providers. It noted that there was a high rate of uptake of BSI's proposals, indicating their relevance and usefulness and the quality of facilitation that BSI provides for implementation.

Why is this? The structure of the BSI programme and the behaviour of its donor representatives in South Sudan and Liberia have isolated it from the types of incentives its fellow TA providers often face, which include pressures to be visible, provide information and deliver activities the donor wants. BSI is a small player and so must support change by working through and with others. It is therefore in BSI's interests to support and improve the quality of other TA providers' outputs. The evaluation posited that the combination of BSI's flexible funding and open-ended design, ODI's position as an independent think-tank, and the use of personnel experienced in working with a low-profile inside institutions, created a 'distinct set of incentives that set BSI apart' (Box 1).

'Arm's-length' does not mean totally out of reach. In managing the BSI programme in South Sudan, the BSI manager and senior advisers update the donor, DFID, regularly and DFID has respected the confidentiality of BSI advice, and has not pressured BSI to provide information its advisers received in confidence. Annual workplans, agreed primarily with the government, are shared with DFID. The programme has been allowed to evolve organically and to respond to context. Annual, ex-post assessments of stories of change have been used alongside a limited set of output indicators to monitor and evaluate progress. On reflection, BSI could have done more to monitor behavioural change, and plans to do so in future. Early on, BSI could also have done more to encourage DFID to build relationships with its key mid-level technical counterparts.

There is a key tension in flexible, arm's-length approaches. It is often difficult to tread between being a neutral trusted adviser, a facilitator, an honest broker, and a promoter of specific agendas. Given their high level of autonomy, it is important that advisers obtain authorisation to work within the areas they do, and stay within them.

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### Box 1: The Budget Strengthening Initiative as an arm's-length organisation

'the BSI programme structure facilitates its strategic orientation and its flexible, problem-solving approach to delivery.

- It is funded from an accountable grant, giving it **greater autonomy** in the pursuit of agreed goals.
- It has an **open-ended design**. Its logframes commit it to achieving a certain number of identifiable institutional changes, without specifying in advance what those changes should be.
- As an implementer, **ODI brings its own mandate as a development think tank** with a commitment to improving international aid practice that goes beyond its immediate accountability to BSI's funders.
- ODI deploys staff... **with experience of working inside institutions and supporting change processes in a low-profile manner....**
- Together, these factors create a **distinct set of incentives** that set BSI apart from other TA providers. BSI teams display an evident concern not just with the immediate outcomes of their activities, but with the success of the wider development partnership. They are willing to facilitate processes behind the scenes without taking credit for them, which contributes to their ability to support meaningful institutional change.... It also affects the way they work with other aid projects. In South Sudan, we observed that they were helping to shape and facilitate other projects and were willing to pass activities across to other projects where that made sense.'

*Source: Cox and Robson (2013).*

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# Changing behaviour, incrementally

Donors need to encourage reformers within governments and the TA providers they fund to identify and solve local problems and establish a positive direction of change. This involves building relationships with mid-level bureaucrats, rather than focusing attention solely on ministers and top-level officials. It means taking time to understand the local problems faced by government officials and the space for reform, before suggesting solutions from elsewhere (Table 2).

In combination, the changes suggested in Table 2 would help to focus governments' and TA providers' attention on local problems. It would also give space and incentives to learn, adapt and adjust reforms on the basis of experience. There would also be space to build coalitions, helping to increase the acceptance of reform over time, and to reduce the gap between form and function. However, the structure of traditional TA programmes will influence how relationships and incentives play out.

Furthermore, donor incentives, which underpin a lot of the behaviour, will remain. Therefore, while change is desirable and possible in conventional TA provision, it will be challenging to realise in full.

Meanwhile, small, arm's-length TA providers, insulated from donor incentives and behaviour, have an important comparative advantage in building trusted relationships, facilitating reform and joining the dots. They can help to deliver work collaboratively with conventional TA projects to realise genuine change. Arm's-length providers can play a complementary role and thus have the potential to improve the effectiveness of those traditional programmes. Given the space for change, wholesale change to TA provision is unlikely to be possible. Instead, the pragmatic solution may be more incremental: to provide small-scale, arm's-length TA projects alongside conventional ones. Genuine change starts with small steps.



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**Table 2: Changing donor behaviour and possible consequences**

Changed donor behaviour	Potential consequences
Work with other external partners collectively when interacting at senior levels.	Minimises transaction costs, and supports clearer and more coherent messages at the strategic, political level in both directions.
Build relationships with mid-level bureaucrats leading reforms in specific areas.	Enables donors to: establish trust with key actors in driving specific reforms, help motivate them, and facilitate direct feedback on TA performance.
Take time to understand the local problems faced by partners in finance ministries and encourage them and TA providers to solve them.	Encourages TA providers to identify and address local problems faced by counterparts, rather than implement blueprints from elsewhere.
Ask the ministry directly for information, using relationships with middle managers, rather than TA providers.	Helps TA providers to build trusted relationships with counterparts.
Allow TA providers to work independently and invisibly and promote and reward collaboration.	Helps TA providers to foster local ownership of reform processes and to encourage collaboration.
Allow an open-ended design of TA support, with project documents and logframes defining broad objectives without being prescriptive.	Allows evolution of solutions over time. Encourages TA providers to acknowledge mistakes and support adaptation and learning with counterparts.
Allow and encourage TA providers flexibility to adapt and adjust support to local problems over time.	
Focus monitoring and evaluation on ex -post, reporting genuine behaviour change, not just delivery of systems and capacity.	Encourages reformers and TA providers.
Commit funding and associated staffing for the long term, and isolate support from adverse changes in context.	Encourages counterparts and TA providers to provide sustained support, and to take a step-by-step approach.

*Source: Author's own elaboration.*

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## References

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- Cox, Marcus and Ken Robson, K (2013) Mid-Term Evaluation of the Budget Strengthening Initiative. London: Agulhas Applied Knowledge ([www.oecd.org/derec/unitedkingdom/Evaluation-Overseas-Development-Institute-Budget-Strengthening-Initiative.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/derec/unitedkingdom/Evaluation-Overseas-Development-Institute-Budget-Strengthening-Initiative.pdf) ).



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A young woman stands up  
in a class at Mogadishu  
University, Somalia.

**Overseas Development Institute**  
203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ  
Tel +44 (0)20 7922 0300  
Fax +44 (0)20 7922 0399

**[www.odi.org](http://www.odi.org)**