



## SECONDING AS A CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT TOOL FOR GLOBAL HEALTH

### LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

## Brief

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Photo credit: Health Policy Project

The USAID-funded Health Policy Project (HPP) supports better health policy, advocacy, governance, and finance through capacity development. HPP learned that improving national and subnational capacities of partner staff, organizations, governments, and systems calls for methods beyond the traditional default of conducting training events. This brief explores “seconding,” one method worthy of increased use for sustainable, tailored capacity development.

HPP has employed seconding in many countries, with each arrangement customized to a unique context and set of in-country project objectives. This brief presents three case studies involving secondments of HPP staff to host-country governments, describes the parameters of these arrangements, and examines achievements and disappointments. Five cross-cutting recommendations emerged for effective seconding, as well as context-specific guidance on seconding, both within a complex bureaucracy and in low-resource and post-conflict settings.

**What is seconding?** A *seconded* staff person reports to work at a *host organization* while employed by a different organization. Employment status (including pay, benefits, and supervision) is the responsibility of the *seconding* (or *home*) *organization*. Seconded staff may report full-time to their host organization, or split their time between their home and host worksites. Such staff members have direct-report supervisors at their home organization, but managers at the host organization oversee their day-to-day responsibilities.

Seconding may also happen within a large organization, or even take the form of a swap of two staff people. Secondments often take place between donors, universities, governments, and civil society; even public-private exchanges have been successful (Buse, 2000).

## Why Is This Brief Necessary?

This brief synthesizes in-depth interviews and exchanges with nine HPP staff members, including seconded staff. It captures HPP's collective experience, knowledge, and insight to help others interested in pursuing secondments.

A scan of relevant literature revealed little on secondment as a capacity development approach in global health. Although secondments are common in other sectors (notably education and the military), only two articles document global health secondments; these explore the impact of secondments on health service delivery. To our knowledge, this brief is the first to report on seconding to ministries of health in order to increase their capacity as policymakers and advocates.

## Seconding to Health Ministries in Three Countries

### **India:** A secondment to institutionalize a new unit in a health system undergoing reform

The challenges and opportunities of health system reform in a huge, highly bureaucratized middle-income country are complex. In October 2011, HPP supported the creation of a new policy unit within India's National Institute of Health and Family Welfare (an autonomous organization under the health ministry) as the country sought to expand healthcare to new populations. The unit was designed to fill gaps in research-based information and analysis for use in policy making and advocacy to improve family planning services and health outcomes.

Over the first year, the unit established basic systems, but was slow and unfocused. Under HPP's technical assistance, specific needs emerged: build the pace and visibility of the unit's work; generate interest in and demand for its offerings; improve the quality of its analyses; and achieve some quick policy wins for the institute. HPP partnered with the unit's leaders to develop a scope of work for a one-year secondment, recruited a seasoned demographer, and set him to work.

In the following year, the demographer's contributions increased the pace and visibility of the unit's work. He completed several major deliverables, including an important 10-year population projection study, and developed excellent relationships with his peers. Despite



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these accomplishments, the institute did not fund a continuation of the position when the contract ended.

The secondment had valuable results, but one of its objectives was left unfulfilled: increasing the capacity of staff to carry on the work after the demographer left. There were two reasons for this missed opportunity. First, it took months for the unit's leaders and staff to understand the secondee's role and responsibilities; only then did a trusting relationship form. Second, the secondee's large workload left little time for collaboration with coworkers. He proceeded in relative isolation on large deliverables, missing the chance to provide on-the-job training through dialogue, delegation, and other forms of teamwork.

As an unplanned bonus, the secondee's own capacity to negotiate India's complex government bureaucracies increased. He continues to apply his new expertise to India's health system.

### **Afghanistan:** Secondments to rebuild and innovate after decades of conflict

In Afghanistan, prolonged war nearly destroyed a relatively well-developed health system staffed by an educated workforce. When HPP's in-country work began in 2012 (building on previous USAID efforts), the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) lacked infrastructure, technical depth in its systems, and resources for new undertakings such as public-private partnerships.

Since 2002, national and donor efforts to reconstitute, redesign, and update government oversight of many sectors in Afghanistan were premised on the need for

Afghan staff to drive the work. The MoPH's first order of business was to reestablish basic health services across the country. At the same time, international partners recognized the long-term need to develop a ministry with governance capabilities to sustain these services. Because the ministry lacked resources and technical expertise in many areas, secondment was an easy answer. As of this writing, 10 departments host seconded staff.

Mandates over the past several years have called for new MoPH focus areas, including finance, private sector engagement (generating more domestic revenue to enable first steps toward independence in a donor-dependent country), and leadership (the MoPH is Afghanistan's first ministry to have a gender policy and directorate). The employment mechanisms of the ministry's international partners allowed for quick, easy recruitment and deployment of Afghan staff to bring these areas forward, so new roles and teams could be established.

In 2012, HPP assumed support of secondees hired through earlier USAID efforts and added to their ranks, fielding 22 seconded Afghan staff in three of the ministry's arms: the Directorate of Private Sector Coordination (DPSC), which includes the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Unit; the Health Economics and Financing Directorate (HEFD); and the Gender Directorate. The DPSC and PPP Unit were established in 2009 and 2012, respectively, and are staffed fully by secondees.

HPP facilitated an organizational capacity self-assessment for each directorate and the PPP Unit. It followed up with short-, medium-, and long-term capacity-building action plans.

The DPSC (including the PPP Unit) is now officially recognized in the ministry's tashkeel (organizational chart) and has 11 staff members based in ministry offices. These employees serve and report as direct MoPH staff, but HPP pays their salaries; provides basic furnishings and equipment; and offers formal and informal technical guidance and capacity development opportunities, such as study tours, training, and daily mentoring.

HPP also pays the salaries of three of the Gender Directorate's five employees and nine of HEFD's 20-plus employees. Moreover, the project supports short- and long-term capacity development opportunities for both secondees and other employees. For example, with HPP's support, HEFD employees became the MoPH's first Afghan health economists after completing master's



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degrees in health economics through a customized academic program in Thailand. Seconded MoPH staff collaborate with their HPP technical counterparts on specific short-term projects, but their primary focus is to advance the mandate of their directorate or unit.

In addition to HPP's secondments, seconded staff arrangements are common across the ministry. For several years, the MPH has coordinated with donors and implementers to shift secondees in 11 priority departments (including the HPP-supported directorates and unit) to direct-hire civil service employment status. This transition is called the "on-budget" process. HPP helped its supported directorates and unit draft "on-budget" proposals stating each group's purpose, priority technical areas and activities, work plan, staffing plan, on-budget requirements, and "off-budget" support (controlled by donors) needed to cover any shortfall. Although even on-budget staff are funded by donors through the World Bank's System Enhancement for Health Action in Transition project, the money runs directly through the government of Afghanistan's national development budget and the government manages disbursement. Not all on-budget staffing requests were approved by the MoPH; the successful transition of HPP-supported staff indicates the added value of the new departments and staff roles in supporting the ministry's goals.

## Malawi: A half-time secondment to support policy and programs for youth-friendly health services

Malawi’s Ministry of Health (MOH) follows a classic scenario for low-income countries, stretching a tight budget to address the serious health needs of the population. Also typical of poor countries, young people constitute a large share of Malawi’s population—67 percent are under age 25 (Malawi National Statistical Office and ICF Macro, 2011). Their reproductive health will have a direct impact on the country’s future. In response, the MOH created and is implementing youth-friendly health policies, guidelines, and services.

HPP supports this effort through the part-time secondment of a junior staff person. For half of each week, she works at the Adolescent Health Team of the MOH’s Reproductive Health Directorate, reporting to the national coordinator for youth-friendly health services. She spends the rest of her time at HPP’s offices, where she reports to the country director and provides technical support to youth-oriented initiatives.

The opportunities created through this arrangement are unique and valuable. The secondee’s complementary dual roles promote synergy and consistency among youth-focused efforts by the ministry, local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the donor-funded initiative, and create leveraging opportunities. Her insider role at the ministry gives her an in-depth perspective on the opportunities and challenges involved in institutionalizing youth-friendly approaches within the government. When necessary, she dons her “donor hat”

to reach more senior MOH staff to create linkages within the otherwise hierarchical MOH.

The secondee faces obvious challenges in juggling priorities between two offices and staying up-to-date and influential in both spheres. In addition, colleagues at the resource-constrained ministry sometimes expect her to mobilize donor funds for unplanned expenses. Nevertheless, input from the ministry, the donor, and HPP’s Malawi office indicates that the opportunities resulting from the secondee’s split time outweigh the complications. Malawi’s MOH—and the youth it serves—benefit, as does the secondee, whose professional development is a resource on which Malawi can draw.

## A Dynamic Picture Emerges: What Secondments Can Accomplish

This scan of HPP’s varied experiences reveals four main purposes of seconding (see Figure 1), which are corroborated by the short list of relevant global health reports.

We emphasize capacity development because this purpose cannot be optional for sustainability. Capacity development should be the fundamental goal of a secondment, and its achievement should not be ignored or assumed to happen automatically. Key informants stated that a relatively small amount of deliberate action and follow-through to support improved capacity can yield a high added value to any secondment. This capacity may be that of the seconded staff person, his or her colleagues at the host organization, the host organization in general, or a combination. The

**FIGURE 1. SECONDING FOR CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT**  
and three additional purposes for seconding in global health policy and advocacy



Seconding should always aim for sustainable capacity. Without such a road map, the secondment is dependent on external support, which is typically sustainable for a few years, at best.

secondment should methodically and explicitly incorporate proven capacity development mechanisms such as coaching, mentoring, on-the-job training, or co-creation of strategies, models, processes, and/or tools.

things” (Gawande, 2011). Properly designed seconding is an ideal professional development tool for sustaining on-the-job support. It is responsive to workplace realities and nurtures networking, diversity, motivation, and other forms of career enhancement (Critchley, 2002).

The improved capacity of the *seconded* is often overlooked as a valid outcome of secondment. When time-limited secondments end, secondees typically continue to serve their countries’ health sectors in a variety of roles.

The other three purposes are discretionary: creating or institutionalizing a new position, supporting linkages between organizations or units, and addressing workload issues. In practice, many secondments implicitly or explicitly aim to achieve more than one of these optional purposes, but the literature and HPP’s experience both indicate that it is unrealistic to expect a secondee to have the time and wherewithal to fulfill all purposes.

## Why Seconding is More Relevant than Ever

The uptake of “more and better” seconding has three important advantages for global health:

1. **Explicit, intentional capacity development is increasingly recognized as a foundational element of any effective global health effort.** The default approach to capacity development—short-term, in-person training events—is now considered insufficient to enrich the capacity of individuals, organizations, and systems (Otoo et al., 2009). Seconding expands the kit of useful tools.
2. **Global health is evolving from a top-down, expert-driven field focused on training individuals to one that employs cross-cutting approaches to strengthening organizations and systems.** This calls for more meaningful partnerships and collaboration within and among organizations (Jacobstein, 2015). Secondments can be effective in building substantive connections, and increasing mutual understanding and social capital, on both individual and organizational levels (Beaverstock, 1996).
3. **Ongoing capacity development is necessary to develop and maintain the seasoned, effective professionals needed to manage increasingly sophisticated health systems.** It has been said that “modern society increasingly depends on ordinary people taking responsibility for doing extraordinary

## Recommendations for Effective Secondments

HPP’s experiences demonstrate how seconding can be highly contextualized and useful for strengthening the policy, advocacy, governance, and finance capacities of individuals, organizations, and health systems. Despite the widely divergent contexts of these case studies, five common recommendations emerged.

### *Cross-cutting recommendations for all secondments*

- **Get the fundamental design right through ongoing dialogue, coordination, and documentation with the host organization. Begin this process before making any other important decisions.** While the importance of input from the host organization may seem obvious, global health activities are too often designed and funded before in-country partners are fully informed. To design a successful secondment with a quick and solid start, implementers must generate a lively and thoughtful exchange with a variety of stakeholders (including the secondee’s future team members), both within the ministry and outside, as appropriate.

Implementers and stakeholders should explore key gaps in the relevant systems of all organizations involved, as well as roles for the secondment in fostering practical, lasting improvements. All parties should articulate their expectations and agree on the jointly created vision and its attendant practical details. These should be captured in clear agreements (e.g., a memorandum of understanding) and a detailed scope of work for the secondee that covers lines of reporting and authority. In addition,

negotiating partners should jointly designate milestones for the transfer of knowledge and skills and assign roles, deliverables, and timelines to measure accountability.

In addition to the obvious benefits, this process can foster ministry ownership and lay the groundwork of trust described in the next recommendation.

- **Build team trust from the beginning.** This make-or-break consideration should begin during the processes described in the previous recommendation, through communication and team-building exercises conducted before the secondee's arrival. Still, mistrust may be an issue even with proper groundwork. Colleagues may wonder if their new officemate is there to spy for the donor, or whether the secondee speaks authoritatively on behalf of the donor, and may therefore upset the status quo (Pierson et al., 2007). In India, valuable months were lost before such a situation became evident and could be addressed.

For this reason, experienced managers recommend hiring a secondee who already has positive relationships with host organization colleagues, or has the skills and time to quickly connect, build social capital, and collaborate productively. Once in place, the secondee should identify a strategic "early win" that can jumpstart good rapport with the host unit.

The ideal candidate for secondment—as well as for the secondee's government counterpart(s)—should be identified early, during development of the scope of work.

- **Explicitly and intentionally monitor and evaluate the secondment from the beginning, in collaboration with the host organization.** What are the specific goals and objectives for the secondment? What indicators and systems will prove success or signal the need for help? The secondee's linkages with professional development or employee monitoring and evaluation systems at both organizations must be specified. In India, capacity development goals for the secondee's colleagues were not realized due to mounting workload pressures and an increasing dependence on the secondee to produce deliverables. Only in retrospect was the failure to develop capacity noted.
- **When creating positions designed to be institutionalized, set salary levels thoughtfully.** Stark salary differences between seconded staff and their government colleagues can foster resentment, and

may even reflect poorly on the government, which is often constrained by limited resources. This problem will be compounded if the secondee's pay and benefits are dramatically reduced when the position is taken over by the government; unfortunately, in such cases, the secondee often leaves rather than accept the cuts.

This does not mean that salary levels must be equivalent. Due to the shorter-term (or even temporary) nature of project-funded work—as opposed to the long-term security of government positions—higher pay may be the necessary trade-off for a lack of job security.

In addition to considering government pay packages, international NGOs should coordinate salary levels among themselves. Rather than bidding up salaries to compete for host-country staff, NGOs in many countries have prioritized long-term development interests over short-term project pressures by sharing salary information and agreeing on reasonable pay bands. Obviously, donor support makes this type of collaboration much more likely to succeed.

- **Convene and connect for sustainability, staff inspiration, and morale.** Due to their work history and connections to the home organization, secondees often bring fresh global health ideas and liaisons. These can be leveraged to build a wide range of linkages to the host offices or teams, which may consist of people who have worked solely for government for a long time. These introductions and new programmatic or strategic connections may foster a broader base of support or even pave the way for new funding. They can strengthen initiatives and connections among government, civil society, and international stakeholders, either internationally or domestically.

This purpose for the secondment (if intended) should be explicitly stated in the scope of work, budgeted (see below), and monitored.

### *Recommendation for seconding in a complex bureaucracy*

- **Strategically employ the dual roles of both outsider and insider.** Often, the secondee's peers—government employees—work within a specific chain of command, with clear and possibly constraining protocols. As an employee of an external organization, the secondee may have flexibility to more easily forge strategic connections—for

*“Many donor efforts fail on account of lack of knowledge of how the government systems work. Our secondees gained that knowledge from the inside.”*

—HPP India project director

example, between nonconsecutive bureaucratic levels, or even inclusive of parliamentarians. Once established, such pathways can continue to serve the host team or unit as organizational capacity even after the secondment has ended.

lessons learned must also be captured, and outgoing staff should fully orient newcomers.

- **Recognize and address gaps in basic organizational capacity—for example, human resources and licensing.** Rebuilding a damaged country calls for flexibility from donors and NGOs. For example, in Afghanistan, seconding was employed partly as an interim measure to enable a quick start-up. However, the envisioned transition to direct hire by the government was stymied by gaps in the basic organizational capacity of units needed to execute the transition—for example, staff without computer training and a human resources department without office systems in place to manage hiring processes. As needed, HPP helped to fill these unforeseen gaps in other government units.

### *Recommendation for seconding in a low-income setting*

- **Budget for success.** In most low-income countries, government budgets are tight. The secondee may not have even minimal resources for unexpected special initiatives or activities. Factor this possibility into the secondment budget, or locate a third party who may be able to help.

In addition to covering practical costs, such funds can generate goodwill from ministry staff. Even a small or symbolic demonstration of flexibility can assuage negative emotions surrounding the often inescapable reality that donors can access far more resources than ministries. Still, the secondee should take care not to be perceived as a steady or convenient funding source. Any funded activities should be justified by the secondee’s scope of work, and should be approved by the manager in the home organization—thus protecting the secondee from hard feelings when a request is turned down.

### *Recommendations for seconding in a post-conflict setting*

- **In post-conflict settings, international staff may turn over frequently due to difficult conditions and security concerns. This has implications for continuity and documentation.** Fostering capacity development and sustainability is always a challenge, but success is even harder to achieve in an unstable environment. Relationships among the staff of donors, NGOs, and host-country stakeholders are constantly disrupted due to turnover. Clear, regularly reviewed documentation of the purpose and scope of the secondee’s work will help incoming donor, implementer, and government staff understand and support the secondment. Ongoing progress and

## A Call to Action

The value of seconding is already recognized by many sectors, in support of many roles: agricultural extension agents, teachers and professors, nurses, doctors, entrepreneurs, bankers and finance staff, and military staff. It is a routine practice at the United Nations. Despite some examples of seconding in global health settings, noted as far back as 1963 in *The Lancet* (Walker, 1963), this development mechanism is not a global health institution and remains underutilized. Perhaps this is because, as one investigator observed, “Little is documented at the programmatic level regarding functional implementation of donor-funded secondments to maximize their benefit” (Grignon et al., 2014). Although this brief begins to address the documentation gap, we urge global health policy practitioners to use seconding where appropriate, to consider our recommendations, and to document their own experiences and insights to build the literature on this effective tool.

### **In a nutshell**

*A successful secondment comes down to*

- *Communication and expectations*
- *Roles, responsibilities, and reporting*

—Malawian secondees

## References

Malawi National Statistical Office and ICF Macro. 2011. *Malawi Demographic and Health Survey 2010*. Calverton, MD: ICF Macro.

Otoo, S., N. Agapitova, and J. Behrens. 2009. *The Capacity Development Results Framework*. Washington, DC: World Bank Institute. Available at <http://wbi.worldbank.org/wbi/document/capacity-development-results-framework-cdrf>.

## Seconding Resources

Beaverstock, J. 1996. "Migration, Knowledge and Social Interaction: Expatriate Labour Within Investment Banks." *Area* 28(4): 459–470.

The author cites international secondments within the British banking system as having value on multiple levels. These secondments not only share direct knowledge and skills, but promote organizational cultural values through modeling and technical guidance—effective because of the social context made possible by working together.

Buse, K. and G. Walt. 2000. "Global Public-Private Partnerships: Part I—A New Development in Health?" *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*. 78(4): 549–561.

In an extensive exploration of the emergence and importance of public-private partnerships for global health, the authors cite the successful use of secondments to foster such partnerships.

Critchley, D. 2002. "Second Sight." *Nursing Management* 9(7): 12–13.

Based on her experiences with the British healthcare system, the author describes the emergence of new roles as the system evolves. She outlines ten advantages of seconding for building relevant expertise.

Gawande, A. 2011. "Personal Best: Top Athletes and Singers Have Coaches. Should You?" *The New Yorker*. Available at <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/10/03/personal-best>.

Continuous learning throughout one's career is indispensable to achieving and maintaining one's best potential performance. The author argues that one of the most effective means of continuous learning is on-the-job coaching. Research has shown that teachers (and likely most other professionals) learn best this way. Coaches can break down performance into components, zeroing in on the details needed for success.

Grignon, J.S., J.H. Ledikwe, D. Makati, R. Nyangah, B.W. Sento, et al. 2014. "Maximizing the Benefit of Health Workforce Secondment in Botswana: An Approach for Strengthening Health Systems in Resource-limited Settings." *Risk Management and Healthcare Policy* (7): 91–98.

The authors examine the secondment of healthcare workers in a U.S. government-funded HIV program, making recommendations

and providing cautionary notes that can be applied to most types of secondments. They advise early and consistent collaboration, management of expectations, and early identification of participants in a secondment. However, they saw lack of clarity and hasty commitment by many stakeholders in the HIV program's secondments, which led to underdeveloped ownership and inadequate resource planning. Lack of congruence in the employment terms of seconded and regular staff presented barriers to sustainability.

Jacobstein, D. 2015. "Measurement of [Organizational] Capacity Development." USAID Learning Lab Webinar. Available at <http://usaidlearninglab.org/library/webinar-measurement-capacity-development>.

Capacity development, as portrayed by USAID's Local Systems Framework, is evolving beyond an exclusive focus on internal improvements to account for the larger context within which an organization tries to make a difference, including a longer timeframe. Realistic measurements of organizational capacity may focus on performance improvement, including indicators that address partnerships and sustainability.

Pierson, R. and T. Ntata. 2007. "Capacity Building Through Secondment of Staff: A Possible Model in Emergencies?" *Development in Practice* 17(1): 104–113.

This article evaluates a two-year secondment that occurred during a 2002 food shortage in Malawi. Trocaire, an Irish NGO, seconded an experienced staff member to CADECOM, a Malawian Catholic charity. This arrangement offered an infusion of expertise; a strengthened relationship between the organizations; insights afforded by a "neutral insider"; and a results orientation, given the urgency of the situation. Problems included difficulties in building trust with a secondee from a donor organization; perceptions of divided loyalty; variations in organizational cultures; and a lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities. The article suggests that such problems can be avoided through forethought.

Walker, G.F. 1963. "Doctors for Nigeria." *The Lancet* 282(7304): 400–402.

The author describes several years of work as a seconded orthopedic surgeon in Nigeria, stating that the expense of secondment (borne by the Nigerian government) was a "luxury," given other broad-based medical needs. One of his biggest personal benefits was his opportunity to confront a wide range of medical cases, which he was able to review with in-country colleagues.

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The Health Policy Project is a five-year cooperative agreement funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development under Agreement No. AID-OAA-A-10-00067, beginning September 30, 2010. HPP is implemented by Futures Group, in collaboration with Plan International USA, Avenir Health (formerly Futures Institute), Partners in Population and Development, Africa Regional Office (PPD ARO), Population Reference Bureau (PRB), RTI International, and the White Ribbon Alliance for Safe Motherhood (WRA).

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