Getting the most from a fellowship scheme

Learning from the Fleming Fund's experience of recruiting and supporting fellows in low and middle income countries

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The Fleming Fund

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Introduction

The Fleming Fund was a flagship investment by the United Kingdom in strengthening antimicrobial resistance (AMR) surveillance in low and middle income countries (LMICs). A core component of the programme was its use of fellowships aimed at strengthening workforce capacity.

The Fleming Fund supported three different fellowship schemes:

- The largest fellowship scheme was run by the Fund's Management Agent (MA), Mott MacDonald, in collaboration with 15 Host Institutions providing mentorship and training. The scheme supported a total professional development of 378 practitioners and policy makers in 21 countries over two phases to boost their technical capacity, as well as awareness and understanding of AMR, and to catalyse cross-sectoral action in partner countries.
- Within the Fleming Fund-supported Commonwealth Partnerships for Antimicrobial Stewardship (CwPAMS) programme, a smaller fellowship scheme was created to strengthen Antimicrobial Stewardship (AMS) and leadership skills of 85 pharmacists. The Africa Leadership Fellowship – AMS (ALF-A) cohort included 45 participants from 8 African countries, whereas the UK-ALF-A cohort consisted of 20 participants from 7 African countries and 20 from the UK.
- Alongside these, placement of health economists was piloted by the ODI to strengthen capacity in relevant ministries (health, agriculture and environment) but proved unsuccessful (with only 3 fellows placed out of an intended 10). Unless otherwise stated, the findings in this paper do not come from this pilot scheme.

The first cohort of fellows began in 2018, and the final fellowship ended in 2026. During this time, the Fleming Fund navigated a range of challenges, including the COVID-19 global pandemic. Itad, as the Fleming Fund's independent evaluation partner has been gathering data about the achievements and experiences of the fellowship schemes since their inception and its conclusions on the wider portfolio of grants can be found in the forthcoming summative evaluation report (see page 9). In this learning paper, we share our key findings and lessons learned for others interested in commissioning or running similar schemes in the future.

Key achievements of the Fleming Fellows

Globally, the fellowships have resulted in a community of AMR and AMS champions and contributed to increased collaboration and understanding across sectors. At a local level, the fellows were playing leadership roles in their respective organisations, promoting practice and attitude improvement, especially in AMS. While the fellowships focused, by design, largely on individuals, the positive effects have extended beyond fellows to the organisations and systems in which they work.

We found very good evidence of the fellowships' contribution to individual capacity strengthening. Four out of five MA fellows (79%) in phase 2 improved in more than 80% of their competency areas (i.e. end point versus baseline comparison). ALF-A fellows also reported a marked improvement in their ability to lead and contribute to AMS initiatives, underpinned by enhanced competence as well as enhanced leadership and communication skills.

The MA fellows also enjoyed the opportunity to interact with renowned experts, participate in global networks and attend international conferences. Moreover, fellows have forged strong (formal and informal) links with each other, across cohorts and sectors in respective countries and sometimes internationally. To foster this, the MA organised fellowship symposia and required fellows to complete collaborative projects.

Beyond the fellows themselves, we found good evidence of fellowships having contributed to strengthening the capacity of institutions and the surveillance system as a whole in Fleming Fund partner countries. Fellows have trained others within and outside their institution and have been involved in the drafting or revising of AMR-related protocols, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and other documents needed to strengthen surveillance systems.

Fellows have also used their enhanced expertise to actively contribute to AMR governance and leadership in their countries. Numerous MA fellows have helped shape country National Action Plans (NAPs) on AMR and participated in the coordinating committees set up to implement the plans. A salient example of contribution to AMR policy comes from Bangladesh, where recommendations from a fellow study led to a decision to relabel and colour code antibiotics. Here, a Policy Fellow was also able to contribute to the issuing of a regulation banning colistin in veterinary use.

> **This fellowship had a strategic benefit to the country as a whole because it strengthened the One Health collaboration and coordination as well as building regional networks and improving surveillance capacity within the country"**
> Dr Darius Owachi
> (Professional Fellow, Uganda)

Fellows played a key role in establishing or strengthening AMS committees, leading AMS ward rounds, improving antimicrobial audit and prescribing practices, and enhancing infection, prevention and control (IPC) activities at the facility level. Fellows also contributed to awareness raising. Two Policy Fellows in Kenya, for example, produced an award-winning and compelling documentary, titled The Silent Pandemic. An ALF-A fellow trained community leaders in appropriate uses of antibiotics in the human and animal health sector by creating a song to raise awareness of antibiotic usage.

The challenges facing fellowship schemes

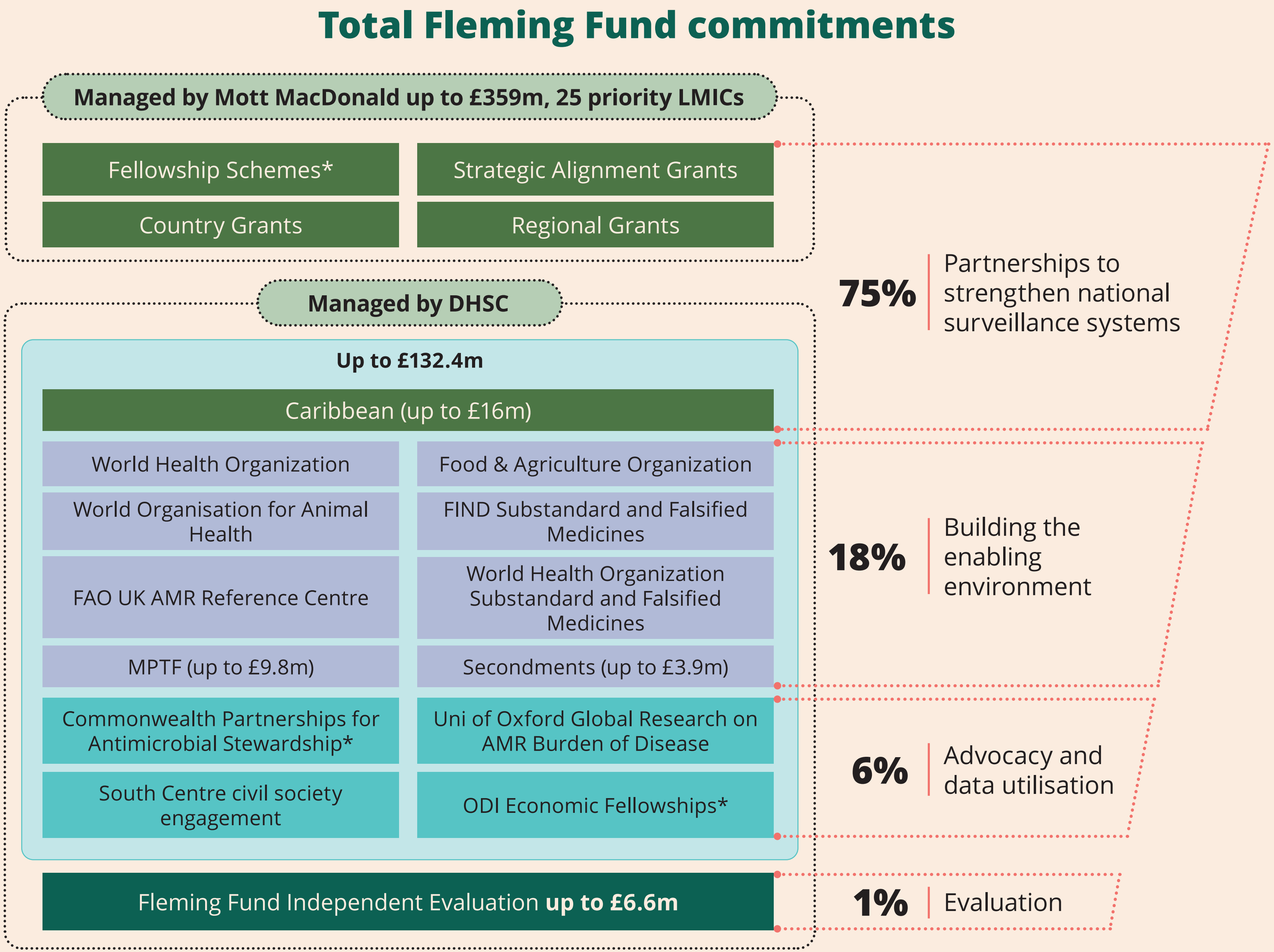
Our evaluation concluded that the MA and CwPAMS fellowships schemes represented good value for money overall. But their implementation and the wider environment in which it took place, presented fellows, and the institutions supporting them, with several challenges. In this section we highlight four key challenges and then look at the lessons learned in responding to them.

1 Linking fellowship and wider programme objectives

The fellowships were set out to strengthen individual capacity and provide fellows with professional and networking opportunities and, in that regard, they were successful. At the same time, however, the fellowships were part of a wider portfolio of country, regional and global grants that had collective ambitions, captured in a programme-wide Theory of Change (see Figure 1). Arguably, the fellowships were meant to ultimately contribute to higher level changes, beyond the individual, such as changes in policy, regulation or practice to tackle AMR and we saw less evidence of that.

The MA fellowships were intentionally contracted separately from other grants (in order to avoid delays in contracting other grants affecting the fellowships as well as to protect fellows' time). If fellowships are kept too separate from other components (when part of a wider programme), however, this can result in a disconnect. At best, this can mean missing opportunities (e.g. for cross-learning and contributing to higher-level priorities), but at worst, fellowships can come too early, before the system around them has sufficiently been strengthened through other interventions. The ODI Policy Fellows pilot was unsuccessful, in part, because the enabling environment (and connection with other grants) was not in place at the time of launching. Within the CwPAMS scheme, on the other hand, fellows were responsible for an objective within their health partnership so that individual and higher facility level objectives were directly linked.

Figure 1: Indicating where the three fellowship schemes were located within the Fleming Fund



* Fleming Fund supported fellowship schemes

2 Enabling fellows to meet the requirements of their fellowship without overburden

Hearing from the fellows themselves, we found that the most common challenge they experienced was balancing the requirements of the fellowships with the day-to-day responsibilities of their jobs. Key challenges included limited access to protected time, competing workplace priorities and the cumulative intensity of different programme components (in the case of the CwPAMS fellowships, of Fleming fellows also involved in Country Grants). From what we know of the typical "double burden" of women who are often responsible for significant amounts of unpaid domestic and care labour even when also working outside the home, there is a risk that this challenge is one that would be experienced more keenly for female fellows. This challenge was also reported to be more acutely felt among fellows based in LMICs than among those based in the UK (in the case of UK-ALF-A fellows) and was presumably not applicable to ODI fellows as their fellowship was full-time.

The MA recognised this challenge and took steps to address it, for example, having employers sign statements promising they would release fellows from some of their duties to be able to complete the fellowship and lowering the time requirement on fellows, from 30% in the first phase of the programme, to 20% in the second.

Some fellows' workplans could have benefitted from being less ambitious. Lowering expectations, however, is only part of the solution. In resource-poor settings it is hard for employers to free up personnel for a significant amount of time. Moreover, the fellowship (except those from the ODI scheme) was not remunerated, as is often the case with fellowships. We found evidence of fellows working overtime to meet the requirements of their fellowships as well as those of their day-to-day jobs (and presumably their caring/domestic responsibilities).

Other factors compounded the challenge. The length of the MA phase 2 fellowships varied from 20 months for the early starters in August 2024 (and who continued to March 2026) to 12 months for some of the late starters, while the intended length of the ALF-A and UK ALF-A fellowships was only 12 months to begin with. In addition, COVID-19 sent a shockwave through the fellowships, creating additional demands on everyone's time. Visits were postponed while travel restrictions were in place, but training continued through centrally run webinars and provision of online materials by Host Institutions.

Despite the challenges of managing their responsibilities, the commitment of the fellows and their motivation was very clear and resulted in high completion rates (93% for the MA phase 2, 100% for UK-ALF-A and 96% for ALF-A schemes) demonstrating that the perceived value consistently outweighed the "burden" of participation. Notably, 95% of women fellows under the MA scheme (in phase 2) successfully completed their fellowships versus 91% of men.

3 Promoting gender equity in fellowship schemes

It is well established in the literature on fellowships, that women are less likely than men to be successful applicants, partly due to bias in selection processes (including self-selection) and structural barriers that put women at a greater disadvantage. The evaluation team explored whether gender balance was an issue in the fellowship schemes and what lessons this might hold for others setting up similar schemes in LMICs.

In the first phase of the Fleming Fund, the gender balance in the MA fellowship scheme was 59% men to 41% women. This disparity was partly due to the sex ratio of qualified staff within institutions targeted in some partner countries. Gender balance improved to almost equal levels in phase 2, but the cause is unclear. Looking at what has been learned to work to increase female participation in academic grant schemes, we can make some reasonable assumptions.

Between phases, the time requirement of fellows was lowered, from 30% to 20%. While still a significant time requirement (see Challenge #2) this may have been enough to encourage more women to apply. Research shows that female role models can help increase participation in competitive fields among women. As the visibility of the first cohort of fellows was raised at country level, it is probable that that more women were encouraged to apply after seeing other women had been successful.

Conversely, the CwPAMS scheme saw a higher ratio of women to men among its fellows. Under the UK-ALF-A scheme, the UK cohort was predominantly female (90%), while female fellows represented 60% of the Africa-based cohort. Gender equity was more of a strategic consideration in this scheme, but this difference also reflects the sex ratio among mid-level pharmacists in these countries (the target group for this scheme).

A distinguishing factor in the Fleming Fund fellowships was the blending of online self-directed training, webinars and face to face opportunities, including mentors travelling to visit the fellows. This approach offered fellows more flexibility in when and how they could access professional development training and this has been shown in other settings to have been a critical factor to improve gender equity.

4 Maximising chances of sustainability

From the outset, fellows have been considered a key route to sustainability for the Fleming Fund. The assumption being that the workforce capacity strengthened and networks built during the programme's lifetime, will continue to provide benefits for some time. With the Fleming Fund only closing in March 2026, we could not test this assumption. Our evaluation, however, flags this as an area for cautious optimism.

Despite some level of turnover between fellows/alumni (including a small number of the more senior ones having already retired), we can already see alumni taking forward the knowledge, skills, and leadership approaches developed during the programme into roles with broader strategic influence, thereby extending the reach and sustainability of programme impact beyond its formal duration. Moreover, the changes that have happened as a consequence of the fellows' activities mean the effects of the fellowship scheme will continue for some time. Fellowships have positively contributed to the prospects for data use, for example, beyond simple direct contributions to national data generation and sharing. Their contribution is best understood in terms of their role in forming communities around AMR, as highlighted on page 2. These networks and communities of practice have the potential to create a more enabling environment within which the AMR policy agenda can advance.

A good practice to foster sustainability trialled by the CwPAMS scheme and some of the Host Institutions under the MA scheme was the pairing of each fellow, not only with an international mentor but also with an in-country co-mentor (often an alumnus from a previous cohort).

Once the closure of the Fleming Fund was announced for the end of phase 2, attention turned to what could be done to maximise the sharing of learning between fellows. An online Fleming Fellows symposium and final learning webinar were important forums to celebrate individual achievements and strengthen commitment. Fellows were also encouraged to keep in touch with their mentors and with each other.

In April 2026, Fleming Fund fellows were invited to join an alumni network hosted by the Fleming Initiative which will continue producing the 'Petri Dish', a newsletter started by the MA to spotlight the work of fellows and share useful resources, as well as hosting webinars and 'town halls'.

When fellowships are part of a wider programme that is ending, however, the risk exists that the systems and enabling environment around fellows will deteriorate, decreasing the opportunities fellows will have to continue putting in practice knowledge and competences acquired and thereby to make a difference. In some settings, for example, it will be hard for fellows working in laboratories to keep generating data, if funds for maintenance of equipment or for consumables are lacking. Continued reliance on fellows' individual motivation and commitment may implicitly assume that they will sustain contributions over time, even as external support declines. While such dedication is a clear strength of the programme, it cannot be assumed to fully offset limitations in the wider system. Without adequate institutional resources, financing, and enabling conditions, this expectation may place a disproportionate burden on individuals and risk obscuring underlying structural constraints that affect their ability to apply and sustain their enhanced capabilities.

Lessons for future fellowship schemes

1

If a fellowship is part of a wider programme, take a systematic approach to linking fellows to the work of other components. This can be achieved, for example, by linking individual workplans or projects directly to higher level objectives and leveraging opportunities for fellows to play a role in the dissemination of the results of other activities in their country. Sequencing is also an important consideration here, ensuring that the enabling environment is already in place in a country before launching a fellowship.

2

Enable fellows to meet the requirements of their fellowship without overburden Workplans should align with the fellow's day-to-day responsibilities; gaining buy-in from prospective fellow's institutions is key. Signed agreements with the fellow's employer may be helpful to ensure fellows are able to free up sufficient time. If resources allow, consider remunerating fellows, residential fellowships (away from the fellow's day-to-day job) and enabling institutions to hire temporary staff to free up fellows at critical periods.

3

Pay attention to what may stand in the way of achieving gender equity among fellows. In addition to exploring the feasibility of participation for all fellows, scheme organisers could consider making available funds to cover caring costs, if needed for fellows to participate in events/trips. When inviting institutions to nominate potential fellows, a requirement could be for equal numbers of male and female candidates to be put forward.

4

Be intentional about how the fellowship benefits will be sustained after the scheme ends. As part of initial discussions with the institutions supporting fellows, agree on ways in which relationships with mentors can be continued (choice of in-country/regionally based mentoring institutions could help in this regard) and have an appropriately resourced exit plan for supporting alumni in retaining skills and connections, while sharing their acquired knowledge with other fellows or beyond.

The experience and achievements of the Fleming Fund summarised in this paper make a strong case for the running of fellowships in the future. Overall, the fellowships offered good value for money, created momentum in the efforts to tackle AMR and have left behind a large cohort of AMR champions connected across multiple sectors.

The fellowships schemes have not been without their challenges and there are lessons that have been learned which could increase the value of future schemes. Especially in situations where a fellowship scheme is part of a wider programme, it is important to consider how fellows can contribute to wider programme goals while enabling them to achieve this without being overburdened. Gender equity and sustainability are also key factors to take into account from the outset.

Finding out more about the Fleming Fund fellows

A collection of the Fleming Fund's learning products is hosted on The Global Health Network in a dedicated Fleming Fund Knowledge Hub. Key resources in the knowledge hub, related to the Fleming Fund's fellowship schemes include:

The Fleming Fellowship Scheme: Transforming leadership in AMR

A Legacy Review was conducted in 2024 by Mott MacDonald, the Fleming Fund's Management Agent, to examine the Fleming Fellowship Scheme's impact from 2018 to 2023, following up on the experiences and career impact of the 181 fellows that completed the Scheme in phase 1 of the Fleming Fund. The report shares the review's findings on the Scheme's contributions to individual and health systems-level shifts.

Fleming Fund phase 1 and 2 evaluations

At the end of each phase of the Fleming Fund, Itad - the Fund's evaluation partner - produced a summative evaluation report, assessing how far the Fleming Fund contributed to its intended outcomes and impact. Both reports are available from the Fleming Fund Knowledge Hub and include findings and recommendations concerning the Fleming Fund's Fellowship Scheme.

Fleming Initiative

The Fleming Initiative has committed to providing an independent, long-term home for alumni of the Fleming Fund Fellowship Scheme. More information is available from their website.

The contributions of the Fleming Fellows will also be featured in forthcoming Itad-led learning products and journal articles on data use, sustainability and One Health; these will also be made available through the Fleming Fund Knowledge Hub.

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