

COMMISSIONED BY THE SDC HUMAN RESOURCES DEPARTMENT

EVALUATION OF THE JPO PROGRAMME 2003–2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Zurich, 31 March 2009

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B-1849A DEZA EVALUATION SCHLUSSBERICHT-090331.DOC

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Objectives

The SDC runs a range of programmes for young professionals both alone and jointly with its partner organisations: it offers internships either at its headquarters in Bern or overseas, makes financial donations to third-level institutes which run courses on international cooperation, supports young Swiss people who wish to work for international organisations, and equips staff with the skills needed to become members of the Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit. Of the many programmes on offer, the JPO (junior programme officer) programme has been singled out for evaluation. The aim of this programme, which is the central component of the SDC's human resources strategy, is to cover 50% of the SDC's need for junior programme officers. It consists of a preparatory year with the SDC in Berne or with a Swiss NGO, followed by a two- to three-year overseas mission with the SDC, an NGO or an international organisation. The changing landscape of international cooperation as the result of new global challenges, cooperation models and priorities means that the SDC needs to review and position its JPO programme more clearly. The present evaluation, therefore, has the following two objectives:

- › To carry out a detailed review of all of the SDC's programmes for young professionals, in particular its JPO programme, and to provide an overview of comparable international cooperation programmes in Switzerland and abroad.
- › To assess the JPO programme by conducting a comparative analysis with similar programmes in Switzerland and abroad, with a view to the future optimisation of the SDC's JPO programme.

Methodology

The present evaluation is based on a series of surveys conducted among all of those involved in the JPO programme. The first part of our work consisted of one-to-one interviews with senior members of the SDC and NGOs. In the second – empirical – part, two written questionnaires were distributed, one aimed specifically at current and former junior programme officers (JPOs), the other at line managers working in the SDC, in an NGO, or in an international organisation; a total of 99 completed questionnaires were received and analysed. The authors also held telephone discussions with managers of other programmes for young professionals in Switzerland and abroad. Finally, a workshop took place in March

2009, during which around 15 representatives from the SDC and various NGOs discussed the authors' recommendations.

Review of the young professionals' programmes run by the SDC and by other organisations

The review found that the many young professionals' programmes run by the SDC are not only diverse but are also open to young people with a range of educational qualifications and levels of experience. However, it was difficult to obtain a comprehensive overview due to the sheer amount of activities in this area, the lack of coherent links between them and the fact that responsibility for them within the SDC is very fragmented. The SDC does not have a coherent and overarching strategy which encompasses all of these activities and which features in its general human resources strategy. Collectively, these activities, which annually provide around 70 young people with an introduction to Swiss and overseas' international cooperation, costs the SDC at least CHF 7 million. The lion's share – CHF 5.2 million/year – is used to fund the training of the 15 candidates accepted on the JPO programme.

A comparison of similar programmes in Switzerland and abroad found that the SDC's JPO programme varies in several ways. The major difference concerns its selection procedure (recruitment in all other programmes is based on an advertised position). Others include the relatively long preparatory phase, the time spent on familiarising participants with the work, as well as the relatively high number of basic and advanced training courses on offer. Overall, the SDC's JPO programme is not only longer but also uses more resources than the other programmes studied here.

Findings

In terms of **input** (design and implementation of the JPO programme), the SDC must clarify its general personnel and junior officer requirements much more accurately. Somewhat paradoxically, both the SDC and its partner organisations tend to think that they are most likely to have a shortage of personnel who have longstanding operational experience in the field, or who have technical and specialist expertise. In other words, there is apparently no shortage of the type of generalists who are targeted by the JPO programme. The high running costs of the three-year programme (CHF 8.5 million) are chiefly due to the complex selection procedure, the intensive coaching which participants receive in their first year,

the plethora of basic and advanced training opportunities, as well as the administrative effort involved in choosing foreign mission assignments.

In addition, the JPO programme now has a considerable surplus of well-qualified humanities and social sciences graduates. The reasons for this situation are twofold: the recruitment of highly and even overly-qualified JPOs in general and the selection of candidates with similar profiles.

By and large, the programme's implementing structures, instruments and processes are rated positively. The structure of the JPO programme - preparatory period in Switzerland followed by a longer period overseas - is also largely endorsed. However, there is disagreement about the length of time spent in Switzerland, the complexity of the JPOs' role and also the number of basic and advanced training courses on offer.

Overall, the evaluators consider that the **output** generated by the JPO programme is both expedient and effective. Most of the survey respondents - JPOs and line managers in the SDC, NGOs and international organisations - expressed satisfaction with the programme output. The main strength of the programme is the combination of a preparatory year in Switzerland with a longer overseas mission. In addition, the training it provides is comprehensive and gives JPOs the opportunity to gather first-hand experience of international cooperation. Its main weaknesses are linked to the selection and recruitment criteria, as well as the actual content of the JPOs' work. Programme participants tend to be overqualified for the junior programme officer role, which means they often feel under-challenged and want to be given more responsibilities. The JPOs also consider that the selection procedure in relation to foreign missions is inefficient and frequently unfair. It should be noted that JPOs posted in NGOs are more critical of the programme than their peers working elsewhere.

Generally speaking, the SDC, NGOs and international organisations rated the overall benefits of the programme positively. However, in terms of **outcomes**, the qualitative cost-benefit assessment found that CHF 8.5 mn for a three-year programme is excessive. To put it simply, the costs of the programme outweigh its benefits. Many survey respondents considered that the JPO programme involved too much red tape and organisational effort.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that the SDC's JPO programme is worthwhile as far as international cooperation is concerned. It dispenses excellent training and enjoys widespread support among participants in our survey. It also attains its goals, yet these are of a nature that makes them hard to quantify.

In our opinion, the annual costs of the JPO programme (over CHF 5 mn) are excessive and compared to similar programmes for young professionals are unwarranted, particularly given the fact that the recruited JPOs are already highly qualified. We recommend that the SDC explores ways to cut costs, particularly in relation to the selection procedure and the first year of the programme, as these are one of the sources of the extremely high demands expressed by very well-qualified JPO programme recruits. In addition, the efficiency of the selection procedure as regards foreign missions is impaired by the fact that JPOs have a considerable say in the final decision. It is also our opinion that JPOs who already have experience should be exempt from the basic and advanced training modules.

To our mind, the SDC's selection of candidates with similar profiles and skills is questionable and is not sustainable in the longer term. The SDC should carry out a thorough review of its general personnel and junior officer requirements so as to redress the considerable surplus of human and social sciences graduates in the JPO programme. However, this implies the existence of a coherent and overarching young professionals' strategy, which in turn begs the fundamental question of the utility that the SDC and its partner organisations derive from running a lengthy and resource-intensive JPO programme.

Recommendations

To find an answer to this fundamental question, we recommend that the SDC takes the following three lines of action. In our opinion, if these are not followed, the SDC should put the further development of its JPO programme on hold for the time being:

1. **Clarification by the SDC and its partner organisations of their need for young professionals and general personnel:** This requires an analysis of the skills requirements (professional and personal) and should take into account the central needs and major priority areas of both the SDC and international cooperation. The analysis should bear in mind that the employment of "specialised" generalists takes precedence.
2. **Development of a coherent young professionals' strategy for the SDC:** This must be forward-looking and linked to SDC activities (themes, profiles/skills, trends). A coherent strategy should encompass all activities to promote young professionals and should

be a key component of the SDC's human resources strategy, which should itself be based on a thorough assessment of the agency's personnel requirements. This should prevent previous participants being accepted on another SDC young professionals' programme, thereby ensuring that other young people are given the chance to take part in one of these programmes.

3. **Analysis of alternative approaches:** There are alternatives to the JPO programme but it entirely depends on the profiles and qualifications required by the given young professionals' programme. For example, temporary positions could be created for junior staff who have specialised in certain areas. Other options would be to offer more internships or to consider stepping up recruitment of external personnel with the requisite skills.

Should the SDC decide to maintain its own JPO programme, we recommend that it takes the following action:

4. **Better coordination of responsibilities:** Responsibilities for programme management, the steering committee as well as the human resources department should be better co-ordinated as regards the individual tasks within the JPO. These tasks should also be set/organised in line with the structure of the SDC's overarching young professionals' strategy.
5. **Setting of clear, quantifiable aims:** The direction of the programme should be clearly defined, and its primary aim - to cover 50% of the SDC's need for junior programme officers (based on clearly determined personnel needs) - should be reviewed.
6. **Clarification of the sought-after profiles and qualifications, and adoption of a needs-based approach to JPO recruitment:** The fact that JPOs tend to be highly qualified and even overqualified is one reason why their expectations diverge from what the role of a junior programme officer entails, causing them to become disenchanted with the job and with the lack of responsibilities they are given. We recommend that the SDC downgrades its entry requirements and recruits candidates with slightly lower expectations. Selection should also be based on the candidates' area of expertise. This applies particularly to JPOs who are posted to an NGO.
7. **Revision of the programme duration and structure:** Given that JPOs are very well qualified and have concomitantly high expectations of their role, the SDC should reduce the length of time initially spent in Switzerland to at least six months. This measure

will also help reduce costs. In contrast, the duration of the foreign mission should remain flexible and be determined on a case-by-case basis.

8. **Formulation and adoption of a clear-cut career plan for every JPO:** This requires greater *commitment* from the JPOs to their career plan. Furthermore, in the interests of efficiency, their overseas assignment should already be discussed during the selection procedure.
9. **Consolidation of operational experience in the field:** As regards overseas missions, JPOs should fully experience what realities the project actually faces. Therefore, their posting should not be restricted to major towns or cities.
10. **Streamlined planning and organisation of foreign missions:** These should be matched to the profile of each JPO, and his/her say in the final decision should be curtailed. To reduce costs further, JPO deployment in an NGO could also be funded from the programme budget. Exploiting synergies between JPO assignments with international organisations and other Swiss JPO programmes (DFA and SECO) would also improve efficiency.