The South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) has a history of successfully using secondments as a tactic for mainstreaming biodiversity into other sectors. Building on this history, the Biodiversity and Land Use (BLU) project placed four secondments into local and provincial government to support the use of biodiversity information in land-use planning and decision making. A secondment is a demanding position that calls for strong skills of communication, organisation and relationship building. The benefits of secondments come from the depth and constancy of the engagement that can only be achieved when someone is available every day to provide biodiversity advice. Secondments can leave a lasting legacy, which makes them a powerful approach for mainstreaming biodiversity.

Case study series:
Biodiversity and Land Use project

Taking biodiversity into everyday work:
Secondments as a tactic for mainstreaming biodiversity
Building on a history of secondments

A secondment is an employee who is temporarily assigned to another organisation to enhance the host organisation’s knowledge about a certain topic, in this case, biodiversity. SANBI’s projects have a history of using secondments as an effective mainstreaming strategy, beginning more than a decade ago. Interestingly, previous secondees now occupy senior positions within SANBI, including within the leadership of the BLU project. Based on the effectiveness of these earlier secondments, the BLU project also elected to use secondments as a method to bring much needed biodiversity capacity to its target district municipalities and their associated provincial departments.

Implementing secondments in the BLU project

Four secondments were made through the BLU project, in full collaboration with the host organisations. The primary requirements for the secondments were qualifications that would provide a strong biodiversity knowledge, as well as experience working within a municipal or provincial setting.

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<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Host organisation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thobile Nyathi</td>
<td>Compliance Monitoring Officer</td>
<td>Mpumalanga Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Land and Environmental Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rosina Masango</td>
<td>Environmental officer</td>
<td>Mpumalanga Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Land and Environmental Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hellen Nonyani</td>
<td>Land-use advisor</td>
<td>Ehlanzeni District Municipality</td>
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<td>Mxolisi Ngubane</td>
<td>Land-use advisor</td>
<td>uMgungundlovu District Municipality</td>
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Managing secondments

The secondments were appointed on full-time contracts within the host organisations. They were directly responsible to the host organisation which provided day-to-day supervision. However, a reporting line to the BLU project management was also set up and the secondments were required to take part in SANBI organisational processes.

Reporting to two organisations is one of the biggest challenges for the secondments themselves, and for the administrative management of secondments. There can be difficulties in aligning the reporting structures and performance management systems between what is effectively two employers. These challenges can be addressed by working through human resources departments to adapt job descriptions and work plans to accommodate both reporting structures. Time management also becomes an issue when the seconded staff member has to attend organisational activities of both institutions.

Since the secondments were working in the context of the host organisation, there were instances where their everyday tasks had little biodiversity relevance. For example, since Environmental Impact Assessments include information about heritage, air quality and other aspects, they could not always be focussed on biodiversity. The secondments could also not simply take on all biodiversity-related matters, because this would remove from their colleagues the opportunity to learn about biodiversity. For the secondments this was a constant balance to try and keep the focus on biodiversity while still fulfilling other tasks and spreading capacity among their colleagues.

The task of the BLU secondments

The BLU secondments were tasked with taking biodiversity information into various stages of land-use planning and decision making, from municipal planning instruments, through environmental authorisation in response to development applications and finally into compliance monitoring. The primary biodiversity information to be mainstreamed were the provincial biodiversity plans. These plans are created using systematic conservation planning. They identify areas that must be maintained in a good ecological condition to meet biodiversity targets, or maintained in functioning ecological condition to deliver ecosystem services. South Africa has developed a strong practice of mainstreaming biodiversity plans and they have been increasingly designed to be integrated into land-use planning and decision-making.
Profiles of the secondments

**Mxolisi Ngubane**

Mxolisi Ngubane was seconded to the uMgungundlovu District Municipality with the aim of supporting municipalities to incorporate spatial biodiversity information into their planning tools. With a BSc Honours degree in Environmental Management, and five years’ experience working as an Environmental Officer at provincial level, he had the ideal background for the position.

Mxolisi spent four years working as a secondment, and observed that the planning tools developed during this time showed a marked improvement in biodiversity content. He cautions that it takes time to get the full attention of municipal officials who are unfamiliar with biodiversity issues. However, he was encouraged “to see the attitude of the municipal officials positively changing towards biodiversity.”

**Thobile Nyathi**

Prior to the BLU project, Thobile Nyathi had experience working as an Environmental Officer at provincial level. She holds an MSc degree in Environmental Sciences.

Thobile spent four years as a secondment to the Mpumalanga Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Land and Environmental Affairs. Her work involved monitoring compliance with the conditions of Environmental Authorisations. She was gratified to see a revival of biodiversity awareness within the Compliance Monitoring and Enforcement section. Another achievement was strengthening the working relationships with other regulating authorities, such as those in the mining, agriculture and water sectors. Thobile reflects “There can be a certain level of expectation placed on secondments, that requires them to show a lot of independence and innovation.”
Benefits of the secondments

Secondments are an incredibly powerful approach for mainstreaming biodiversity. The benefits go far beyond the relatively superficial capacity building of a once-off training session. Through their everyday presence, secondments can influence the working culture of an organisation so that biodiversity remains at the forefront.

Boosting biodiversity capacity

The partner organisations felt an increased confidence in their internal capability to take biodiversity into account. As Hulisani Magada, a project officer of the BLU project noted: “If you speak with municipal staff, they always speak very highly of the secondments. The town planners, Integrated Development Plan managers were excited to have the capacity to do more with biodiversity.”

Going beyond their role

The secondments were often sought out by staff from other departments to provide biodiversity advice. The host organisations welcomed a known point of contact for biodiversity information. Given their position between two organisations, secondments are able to make connections between different projects.

Reducing pressure

Most of the host organisations were struggling to achieve their own mandates with limited capacity. The existing staff felt overburdened. The secondments helped to remove some of the workload. As well as having an immediate benefit to organisational functioning, the added capacity also allowed existing staff the time to prioritise and improve efficiencies for the future.

Sustainability

It was always understood that the BLU secondments were temporary placements, and the project could not provide ongoing capacity over the long term. For this reason, there was a strong emphasis on achieving sustainability in other ways, including imparting information to colleagues who would remain, and developing written resources as an ongoing reference.

Capacity for the biodiversity sector

Many of the BLU secondments were relatively young professionals. Over the course of their secondments, the host organisations noticed marked personal growth and rising confidence. As Robyn Luyt, manager of a secondment to DARDLEA, observed: “One of the top successes of the project was the growth and development of the secondment herself on a personal level. She will be an asset to the biodiversity sector.”

The skills required of secondments

The role of a secondment is demanding and calls for a diverse set of skills:

- The ability to make strong working connections, a strong work ethic and initiative to take on work independently.
- A secondment needs to be able to keep learning everyday while they work, quickly absorbing the everyday tasks of the host institution while keeping a broader perspective of where biodiversity may be relevant.
- Local government is a very dynamic work environment, and experience is required to navigate local politics and understand local issues.
- Secondments also fulfil a training role, passing on biodiversity knowledge to their colleagues informally through everyday practice and formally through capacity building sessions. This requires the ability to communicate knowledge easily, explain simply, and convince others about why biodiversity is important.
- Secondments also need to be highly organised, to manage the administrative demands from two organisations while still finding the time to do their jobs thoroughly.