



**Partnership
Working between
Philanthropy
& Government**

*Paper 1: Early Insights from
The Atlantic Philanthropies Experience*

Context

The Social Change Initiative (SCI) is an international, not-for-profit organisation. Its mission is to improve the effectiveness of activism for progressive social change, particularly in divided societies, with particular reference to how this work is funded and supported.

The Atlantic Philanthropies (Atlantic) is a limited life foundation which has ended its grant making after 23 years in Northern Ireland. To sustain aspects of work previously funded in the areas of children's services, dementia care and shared education, Atlantic adopted the approach of partnering with government.

Three partnership 'Signature Projects' were funded with £64 million over the 2014-19 period. Of this, 60% came from six government departments and the remaining 40% from Atlantic. The three projects are:

- ▶ The Shared Education Signature Project involving schools working in partnership to improve the education process and break down community barriers;
- ▶ The Early Intervention Transformation Programme which seeks to use prevention and early intervention approaches to improve life outcomes for children; and
- ▶ Dementia Together Northern Ireland which tackles stigma and improves support for people with dementia, enabling them to live better lives over a longer period.

SCI oversees the government partnership grants awarded by Atlantic. Recognising the importance of documenting and sharing strategies for social change, SCI has reflected on the partnership experience between Northern Ireland government departments and Atlantic Philanthropies, as an independent funder, to identify learning applicable to broader social change efforts.

This reflective note on the Atlantic experience offers insights to other philanthropies and grant-making bodies who are considering partnering with government.

Observations on the transition for philanthropy from grant maker to government partner

The transition from grant maker to government partner impacts on the relationship that a philanthropy has with its previous/current grantees, NGOs, other stakeholders and on the philanthropy itself. This requires thoughtful management and communication to ensure that the rationale for partnership with government is articulated and understood. In addition:

- ▶ It needs to be recognised that given the role that the philanthropy plays as a partner in the formulation and governance of the agreed joint programme, its voice as an external advocate and critic will necessarily be limited.
- ▶ Given that current/former grantee partners and NGOs are an important source of advocacy and practice knowledge, thought should be given as to how they can contribute to the partnership objectives both in a challenge role (providing robust external scrutiny and comment) and on a practice-to-policy basis.
- ▶ The philanthropic partner needs to be realistic when defining the outcomes that the partnership plans to achieve. Expectations must be managed as to the extent of the leverage and influence that your investment (financial, expertise, networks) will bring in terms of pace and extent of service practice, delivery, organisational, policy and cultural change, as well as the delivery of tangible outcomes. For Atlantic the sum of £23 million invested was significant, but still a tiny proportion of overall government spend. Its value and contribution however, went beyond the financial input.
- ▶ The pay-off for philanthropy is the fact that significant traction can be achieved through focusing on a specific number of select priority areas, with a clear and relentless eye on the outcomes to be achieved.

Observations on implementation and delivery

The details of effective partnership working require attention to process and delivery as well as to overall objectives and outcomes. Consequently:

- ▶ Time should be devoted from the outset of the establishment of the partnership to fully consider, agree and formalise both the outcomes to be delivered (the ‘what’) but also ‘how’ all parties will work together within the partnership governance framework.
- ▶ Successful partnership working needs to be supported by a governance framework (reflected in a formal Memorandum of Understanding between the stakeholders) that clearly outlines roles, responsibilities, values, ways of working, measures of success and accountability for delivery of outcomes.
- ▶ It is essential that all the relevant decision-makers are involved in the negotiation of the partnership. Effective partnering with government works best when all those who are likely to be responsible for managing and delivering the change on the ground are involved in both negotiating and agreeing the programme, expenditure and governance frameworks.
- ▶ In addition to the decision-makers involved in negotiating the partnership details, it is essential that the whole public policy network (i.e. government departments, agencies and arms-length bodies) understands. If negotiated at the top it cannot be assumed that the information, decisions and intended changes will automatically cascade down to the delivery bodies.
- ▶ On a practical basis, it is important to agree and detail a clear framework and mechanism within which both parties will release committed funding and resources (people, training etc.) at agreed dates throughout the lifetime of the partnership.
- ▶ Ongoing clear and timely communication and engagement with all concerned has proved key to effective partnership working and delivery.

Conclusions

There are several conclusions to be drawn from reflecting on the Atlantic Philanthropies experience of partnering with the Northern Ireland government. These include:

- ▶ The issue of the sustainability of the desired transformation is critical. This requires an emphasis on ‘system reform’ rather than time-limited, resource-driven project initiatives. The incorporation of policy changes in service commissioning, design, delivery and practice at a systemic level is also essential for sustainability of the programme outcomes.
- ▶ Notwithstanding clarity at partnership governance level, policy implementation is a dynamic, rather than a linear, process, which invariably involves interpretation of policy aims. This can result in implementers making decisions which are different from those intended at the strategic level. It can also be experienced where government has difficulties in working horizontally across departments or vertically through its arms-length bodies. Attention must be paid to guard against policy drift where the agreed change programme is being applied at different levels and by a range of implementing bodies.
- ▶ Independent evaluation, commissioned and implemented from the outset, is critical to monitor and interrogate both the programme process and outcomes. An appropriate baseline monitoring and formative evaluation framework should be incorporated into the partnership Memorandum of Understanding. Adequate resources should be invested in evaluation, preferably made available directly by the philanthropic donor to ensure independence and robustness.

- ▶ The importance of philanthropic partners being prepared to assert their role, not merely as a guardian of the time, skills, people and money they have contributed, but more importantly as a constant champion of the sustainable transformation required and agreed. The objective of systemic change needs to be formalised in the partnership Memorandum of Understanding as part of the external funder's investment conditions.
- ▶ Philanthropic partners need to maintain a strong, evidence-based and objective focus on drawing learning from the partnership and demonstrating the effectiveness of policy and service deliverables and outcomes achieved. They can also boost the confidence of government change agents by drawing evidence from previous examples of interventions that added value to government policy formulation and practice delivery.

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This is the first in a series of papers drawing out lessons and observations from The Atlantic Philanthropies partnership work with the NI Executive.