

Conclusions Report

Pilot Grants and Learning Process

In June 2021 Corra launched a learning process and pilot grants with the aim of continuing to improve our approach to supportive and accessible grant-making. The [Learning and Pilot work](#) specifically focused on ‘shifting the power’ between funders and grantholders and between partners in Scotland and overseas. Six partnerships are involved in this initiative, a total of 11 participating organisations from India, Malawi, Rwanda, Scotland and Uganda.

This report provides an overview of this process and summarises what was shared by participants.

To learn more about Corra’s international grantmaking and wider work please contact chrissie@corra.scot or elaine@corra.scot.

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Context

Corra has been thinking about power dynamics and inequalities for a while – in shaping our programmes and grantmaking we are guided by a belief that communities should be at the centre of change and play lead roles. These are perspectives which mean we are very supportive of efforts to shift the power to communities including organisations based alongside those communities in international grantmaking.

There are a number of longstanding international development sector commitments to ‘localisation’, or the practice of transferring more funding and agency into the hands of local or national organisations based in the countries and regions where grants are being implemented.¹

These efforts to ‘shift the power’ closer to the communities at the centre of development work gain additional importance in the context of our increasing awareness of how colonial history and current bias and inequity continue to influence international development programming and delivery.

These factors have led to a number of British funders questioning the power dynamics inherent in the traditional model of international ‘conduit funding’, where grants are made to a UK-based organisation which then works with ‘implementing partner’ organisations based in the country where most of the practical work will take place. Alternatives and adjusted approaches are being explored: the use of new intermediary grantmaking platforms, the opening up of decision-making processes, and decisions by some funders to make grants directly to organisations based in the countries where programmes will be implemented. In this context, it felt like a good time for Corra to be exploring how we could better address power dynamics and inequity in our international work.

One aspect we were keen to explore was partnership. With powerful partnerships one of our key strategic themes, as a Scottish foundation we were also thoughtful of the role of Scottish communities in this area of work.

Our reflections on past international grantmaking to partnerships of organisations based in Scotland and overseas had highlighted to us how these grants and relationships help Scottish communities be more informed and engaged on global issues which affect us all –

¹ Localisation, initially discussed with particular reference to humanitarian response, is now used as a term to cover broader shifts within the international development sector as a whole. The ICVA briefing paper, *Localization Examined*, provides a useful overview of the term and how policy commitments to localisation have evolved in the 30 years from 1991 onwards; [ICVA-Localization-Examined-Briefing-Paper.pdf](https://icvanetwork.org/publications/localization-examined-briefing-paper/) (icvanetwork.org).

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not least the urgency of the climate crisis. We were interested to see if by doing things differently as a funder could we help address some of the typical inequities of partnership funding while preserving the connections between people who work in partnerships.

What we did: aim, approach and elements

Aim and objectives

Titled *Voices, Relationships and Partnerships in International Development*, Corra launched its learning process in June 2021.

The aim of the learning process was:

To continue to improve our approach to supportive and accessible grantmaking, with a focus on the international development sector

The programme was designed to explore potentially innovative grantmaking processes that could:

- Support powerful and equitable partnerships that generate lasting positive change for both partners and the communities involved.
- Help ensure the voices of all those involved in a project/ initiative are heard.
- Facilitate learning and connections of value to all those involved in the funded activities.

The approach

There were **three main elements** to the learning process:

- i. Six pilot grants were made to five partnerships to allow the testing of practical approaches and templates.

Corra reviewed grantmaking records to identify Scotland-based charities which work in partnership with organisations overseas and:

- Had pre-existing relationships with Corra,

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- Had received grants from Corra's own funding programmes,
- Represented a mix of small- to medium-sized charities working in different sectors, which needed to include work with a climate focus and on inequalities,
- Worked in a range of countries around the world.

Five organisations were approached in June 2021 and asked if they were interested in participating in the process, involving both a pilot grant and participation in the learning element: all were keen to do so and one requested to work with two local partners, leading to the six grants made subsequently.

Organisations were then invited to complete a short application form including a budget with their proposal for a short-term initiative or mini project that could be delivered within a 6- to 12-month period.

Corra was open to suggestions for different kinds of proposals, placing criteria that the majority of the spend should be outside Scotland and that grants should be based on a plan which was sufficiently detailed to allow for trialling of application and reporting templates. While, this ruled out completely unrestricted grants dedicated to core costs alone it still allowed organisations freedom to select what they felt would fit best with this funding opportunity. The proposals made by organisations included using the pilot grant for:

- an inception phase for a longer follow-on programme,
- for needs and feasibility assessments,
- for developing a model in a localised area for future replication,
- for a community-led process, and
- for organisational development.

Recognising the staff time required to participate in learning discussions and share feedback on templates and processes trialled, Corra was open to organisations using a proportion of the grant to support staff and also made an additional recognition payment to each organisation for them to use as they wished.

Making the pilot grants allowed Corra to trial and revise application and reporting forms and processes, as well as to hold conversations with participating staff based in a range of countries on different aspects and themes relevant to international grantmaking.

Learning on these grantmaking processes was pulled out and shared in two Insight Briefings prepared on the basis of participants' feedback and with drafts shared for their review. These were released during the process, the first on *Application and Assessment* in October 2021, and the second on *Reporting and Relationships* in February 2022; these are shared in Annexes 1 and 2. In addition, participants' comments and audio commentary were used to create a short graphic clip sharing their views on the importance of shifting the power in international grantmaking; this is available [here](#).

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- ii. Staff from the five partnerships participated in co-designed exploration of key themes and issues.

An initial kick-off meeting in August 2021 was used to discuss with participants what they felt would be important to cover in the learning process: from this came the identification of key themes and agreement on how participants preferred to hold consultations and share their views.

This agreement provided the basis for the organisation of five discussions on the following themes which were held in the September to December 2021 period: *Sustainability, Safeguarding, Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability & Learning (MEAL), Peer exchange and capacity building, and, Global priorities and awareness.*

Ahead of each meeting Corra circulated indicative questions based on issues identified in earlier discussions, also sharing an open invitation to participants to present or chair. Following the first meeting on *Sustainability*, Corra also invited participants to contribute to preparatory thinking around each theme, collecting and sharing inputs as part of each meeting agenda. These are available in Annex 3.

- iii. A sector-wide survey and consultation meetings brought in perspectives from Scotland-based organisations, networks and their partners.

Consultation with the pilot grant participants identified issues and aspects of grantmaking and management which they felt were important for international development funding that supported equity and sustainability. These points, and a subsequent round of feedback from pilot participants, informed the formulation of a survey to circulate to the wider sector, with the intention to complement the in-depth discussions with participating organisations with wider feedback from others across the sector.

The anonymous online survey was intentionally short, comprising 10 required questions plus one optional open question, and took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Responses were invited from both Scotland-based organisations and organisations working overseas who work on international development, with circulation kindly assisted by the two networks [Scotland's International Development Alliance](#) and the [Scotland Malawi Partnership](#), as well as the [Malawi Scotland Partnership](#). Launched on 16 September through the online Survey Monkey platform, the survey closed after 6.5 weeks on 31 October 2021. A report and an infographic presenting the survey responses are available in Annexes 4 and 5.

Corra then held a consultation meeting with the three networks to share and help contextualise the survey results, and to gather their inputs and perspectives on shifting the

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power in international grantmaking. Corra also held a specific meeting with the Alliance's Learning & Development Manager on MEAL and safeguarding as two of the specific themes pilot participants had identified as important.

What we learnt

About grantmaking processes

Testing application, assessment, and reporting processes and gathering participant feedback on templates and how these worked for them helped us refine tools and identify factors which were important across processes.

Space and language

There are different barriers to telling stories and explaining contexts across 'international spaces'. People wanted more space, flexibility, and opportunities for conversations.

Space is important. While we trialled light touch application and reporting templates in keeping with good practice for UK grantmaking, people told us they wanted more space to share information about their needs and proposals. Participants told us that international grantmaking is just different in this respect: people in diverse settings need more space to share background and information on the issues facing a particular community that the funder in another country is unlikely to have.

Feedback on the reporting form we trialled was similar. People wanted extended space, and also flexibility to answer questions in different ways – e.g. some wanted to attach a Gantt chart, others wanted to share examples of community photography as evidence of impact. People also really valued additional opportunities to have a conversation about their work – really valuing assessment call discussions and also wanting the option of an informal online meeting of partners to discuss issues raised in reports with the funder.

Language is an important factor, for both written and in-person communication. We saw that English fluency and using newer inclusive terms can be both be barriers to overseas partners playing an equal role. This is related to space, as summarizing to tight word counts can be additionally challenging for those working in a language which is not their first. But we also saw that using newer, more inclusive terms which are familiar in the UK context can be barriers to overseas partners playing an equal role.

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Here, there was a clear irony in that using language designed to promote inclusion and break down barriers could prove confusing for some of those joining our discussions from overseas. Corra, like many other funders in the UK, feels language and what it represents is important, and we often use terms like “working alongside communities” or “amplifying voice”. Such terms may be alien and confusing for those not familiar with them, including people working in organisations based overseas.

It is important to understand and be sensitive to the fact that different people will have different levels of awareness of the politics around the use, meaning and connotations of certain English terms (such as ‘aid’, ‘beneficiaries’ etc.). We should ensure that these issues around language don’t create barriers to communicating clearly or to people feeling comfortable when they are speaking to us. As one participant in the process put it, it is important that in balancing the sensitivities involved in language we “navigate with kindness”.

In this, we as funders should be the ones ‘doing the work’ and investing time to make sure the language we use is clear to everyone. Going forward, Corra is reviewing how best to do this and are considering developing a short guide to explain clearly what we mean by key terms when talking about international grantmaking.

Using processes to shift the power

Processes can be used to shift the power and support equity in international grantmaking and partnerships. They can also be used to advance good practice and people welcomed this.

We trialled an approach which explicitly involved both partners in the application, assessment, reporting and general communication on the grant. The application and assessment placed emphasis on the quality of the partnership relationship. The reporting template and approach used required reflection and comment from both partners and was flexible in offering grantholders different ways to respond to questions and share information about the grant.

Processes can be used to shift the power. Participants told us that adopting these kinds of processes, along with open communication with the funder on different issues, helped to shift the power from funder to grantholder and between organizational partners.

The open survey we ran confirmed this: over 70% of respondents felt that a key step to shifting the power was for funders to be clear and transparent on application criteria, requirements and decision-making, and for overseas partners to be involved in applications.

On shifting the power from funders to grantholders specifically, participants told us how much they valued feedback on applications (whether successful or unsuccessful), and that

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funders providing feedback was welcome evidence of respect for the time of those who put work into preparing the application.

Survey responses echoed this, and also shared the suggestion that just as some organisations workplans include milestones and key performance indicators, funders should also aim to do this through committing to maximum turnaround times for decision-making and processing of payments, and should also establish channels for constructive feedback on their support.

Processes can support equity. Participants told us that including both partners equally in all grantmaking processes and communication sends an important signal and helps to frame joint work on the grant in general. People want grantmaking processes to include both partners – both our engagement with the pilot grant participants and the sector survey supported this. This includes application, assessment, reporting, and general communication, including feedback on applications and reports and other engagement on networking or cross-cutting issues.

Processes can be used to advance good practice. Pilot participants identified a number of important themes relevant to grantmaking, and our discussions during the learning process covered these and other areas and issues relevant to good practice in international development work such as accountability to communities, environmental and other aspects of sustainability, safeguarding, diversity and inclusion, etc.

Through both conversations with pilot participants and the survey people told us that they want to be asked for their plans and evidence on these kinds of important issues. People wanted funders to prompt on good practice, for evidence of community leadership or carbon impact assessments, for example.

Pilot participants told us clearly that as funders the questions we ask can encourage good practice: for example, the benefits of reframing a typical question about need or ‘project justification’ to “what is the community telling you about their needs / the impact they see?”. They also gave examples from past funding where being asked certain questions in an application form (e.g. on disability inclusion) led to their organisation subsequently rethinking their approach and strengthening it. People felt funders asking for more information about these kinds of issues signalled how important they are and encouraged positive change.

About the relationships involved

People are keen to move beyond traditional models towards more equitable relationships and see this as positive and potentially powerful.

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The learning process highlighted a number of important points related to the relationships involved in international funding that were relevant to shifting the power and to supporting organisations towards greater success (both on a specific project and in their more general work). This included relationships between the funder and grantholders, and between grantholder partners.

People care who their funder is and value that relationship. Pilot participants told us that they want more information about funders' values and expectations, seeing this as part of building a relationship which includes 'two-way' trust and accountability, a key element in shifting the power. Important to that trust are personal relationships: participants were clear they want a dedicated and/or consistent grants manager with whom they can build a trust-based relationship. In discussions, such relationships were seen as a key factor for honesty, flexibility, and success in solving potential problems that might arise. The great majority of survey respondents confirmed this, with over 75% noting funder relationships with both partners – and a dedicated person from the funder's side – as important to help shift the power.

Partnerships are valued for different things beyond access to funding. This varies across partnerships but important functions can include access to expertise and information, mutual (non-financial) support, sector awareness, and personal relationships. Our pilot grant partnerships had been identified to include perspectives from a range of organisations but as we got to know more about the partners we learnt there was even more diversity than we had initially realized.

While there were some commonalities, each partnership was a different combination of assets and contributions in different areas that went beyond funding flow. For example, some overseas organisations were larger in size and turnover than their Scotland-based partners, some Scottish partners were older than their overseas partners, some younger, and some were growing together. In some partnerships, aspects of technical expertise, project design or MEL skills were part of the contribution from the Scotland-based partner, while in others the overseas partner brought these skills and knowledge. In each partnership, all partners contributed with different areas of strength and expertise which they brought to the relationship and collaboration.

Responses to the sector-wide anonymous survey confirmed this diversity in reasons for partnership. Notably, almost all survey respondents said their partnership had functions which they valued beyond access to funding. Only two respondents, one based in Scotland and one overseas, noted that the main purpose of their partnership was fundraising.

Overall, survey respondents most valued (at over 73%) the partnership functions of mutual support and non-financial help, and wider awareness of new sector developments and

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opportunities, as well as (50-61%) access to helpful information or expertise and personal relationships. Personal relationships were especially important to overseas respondents (75%) and to respondents from organisations based only in Scotland (60%), while respondents from organisations with offices in multiple countries valued personal relationships far less (20%).

Partnerships come in different shapes and sizes. The diversity of reasons why organisations partner is mirrored in the diversity of types of partnership and roles within partnerships. Making assumptions about partnerships (e.g. which org has stronger due diligence, more technical expertise on XYZ topic, higher turnover, etc.) can be dangerous and risk reinforcing stereotypical and unequal power dynamics. For funders, this is another reason why it is important to include both partners in conversations and waiting to hear from them what roles they will each play on the grant and why.

People are keen for more connections and relationships. A very strong message from our conversations with pilot participants was how much they valued peer connections, exchange and learning – and they were keen for more connections and exchange in future. Particularly in the context of wider global efforts for social and climate justice, people saw value in new links with organisations working in Scotland domestically as well as with other internationally-focussed organisations.

About the non-monetary things funders can do

People are keen to see new framing for partnerships as active collaboration on global issues of social and climate justice which affect us all.

Facilitate connections and exchange. People really want a platform for exchange with other grantholders, and for funders to facilitate introductions and support networking. We had expected that pilot participants would find it interesting to exchange with each other but hadn't expected how extremely popular this was.

The great value that organisations place on funders facilitating peer networking and exchange was one of the strongest messages from the pilot. Here, connections in all directions were valued, including between or among organisations based overseas ('South-South'), organisations based in Scotland ('North-North'), as well as organisational links internationally (South/North-North/South).

Support learning and good practice. People are very keen to learn about and from each other, with peer learning identified by pilot participants as their generally preferred form of learning and capacity building. This includes learning on sector best practice in key areas

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(e.g. MEAL, ethical storytelling), and on recent developments or issues relevant to international work (e.g. safeguarding, carbon auditing).

The survey confirmed this: 80% of respondents said funders facilitating peer exchange and supporting networking with organisations working in similar fields would be valuable to support learning which improves grantholder internal practice and benefits the wider sector. We also heard from pilot participants and survey respondents how important it is that grantholders themselves have a key role in identifying what they need.

On safeguarding, identified by pilot participants as an important cross-cutting issue for grantmaking, people told us that funder support for grantholders to strengthen their practice would be valued, as would the establishment of a contingency pot, held at fund level, to help respond to an incident or issue if needed.

Assist advocacy and influencing. People feel funders can have a role in influencing and also support those who are speaking out. This includes supporting advocacy or ‘amplifying voices’ (by providing a platform, promoting or endorsing statements, convening events, etc.) as well as helping to support or protect those who are speaking out (supporting speaking at events was an example given, as well as the ‘protective’ function which the involvement and interest of an external funder can have on activists speaking out on issues in potentially hostile political environments). Despite the distances which international funding may involve, organisations were clear that they saw such support as valuable. Funders can also support and contribute to external communications around organisations’ work and assist wider promotion and information sharing.

About Corra’s own approach and support for this learning process

All participants agreed that there was sense of ownership within this process. Feedback illustrated that people felt able to contribute to the design and valued the time, space and commitment Corra had given to the overall participatory approach.

There was a genuine sense of collaboration amongst the partners and alongside Corra. Participants saw Corra as having a key role in helping facilitate and support this structure. Corra staff were signalled out as being critical to this, by creating the right atmosphere. Participants talking openly about Corra’s professionalism, friendly and supportive nature while still providing context and posing challenging questions that prompted discussion.

Corra staff involved agreed that having two dedicated people working on this was essential. They felt it allowed the pilot to remain on track, with staff able to undertake a greater depth of preparation and facilitation for partner meetings. Everyone clearly warmed to both staff and recognised the value in their inputs in the meetings. And while this was positive, it did

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result in both staff communicating with partners at multiple times on the same theme. Partners spoke candidly that this resulted in too many layers of communication which created confusion and often left them unclear on expectations. It was recommended that in future Corra should look to streamline communication (especially the level of emails). People recommended having one point of contact for each partnership would offer a level of consistency. An important point that resonates with comments made earlier on the importance of building a relationship with a primary Grant Manager.

Concluding reflections to guide our future work

Funders can make practical changes to their processes that help to **address negative power dynamics** and make a real difference to organisations and partnerships:

- They can think about language and space and consider the different barriers to telling stories and explaining contexts across 'international spaces'. People want more space, flexibility, and opportunities for conversations.
- They can think about how they can adjust their processes and use them to help shift the power and support equity in international grantmaking and partnerships. Processes can also be used to advance good practice and people welcomed this.

Relationships really matter: how partners work together and how they engage with their funder has important implications for both equity and achieving positive change. People are keen to **move beyond traditional models** towards more equitable collaboration and see this as positive and potentially powerful. Funders can approach partnerships in a way which helps to shift the power and recognizes the diverse strengths and roles of different organisations. Funders can also ensure their relationship with grantholders is supportive and fosters trust and openness.

People see funders as able to do more than provide funds and are keen to see more 'funder plus' ways of working. They are keen to see new framing for partnerships as **active collaboration** on global issues of social and climate justice which affect us all. This extends to funders playing a more active role in facilitating global connections, encouraging and supporting good practice in key areas through exchange and capacity building, as well as amplifying organisations' and communities' voice and impact through advocacy support.

Annexes

Annex 1: [Insight Briefing 1](#)

Annex 2: [Insight Briefing 2](#)

Annex 3: [Highlights from thematic discussions](#)

Annex 4: [Survey infographic](#)

Annex 5: [Survey Summary report](#)

About Corra Foundation

Corra Foundation exists to make a difference to the lives of people and communities. It works with others to encourage positive change, opportunity, fairness and growth of aspirations which improve quality of life. Corra wants to see a society in which people create positive change and enjoy fulfilling lives.

In 2020 Corra launched a ten-year strategy. It is long term because making a difference on the big challenges will take time. At its heart is the strong belief that when people find their voice, they unlock the power to make change happen.

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