

Learning Process

Insight Briefing Application and Assessment - October 2021

Background

In June 2021 Corra launched a pilot fund 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 grantees 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.

These short briefings provide insights into what we are hearing from the participants. This briefing focuses on feedback received on the application and assessment stages. To learn more about the wider International Pilot Fund contact chris@corra.scot or elaine@corra.scot.

What we did

Corra trialled an application form, then revised this on the basis of feedback from participants for a second-round application. The pilot asked for information on both partners and both were involved in the assessment call. In keeping with evolving grantmaking practices we tested a 'light touch' application.

There are different barriers to telling stories across 'international spaces'

- **Explaining very different contexts needs more space.** Participants' feedback was word count was restrictive. They wanted more space to share context, background to their organisations, past work and achievements. Participants welcomed opportunities to include attachments (e.g. workplans). Participants felt this reduced the pressure to squeeze everything into the form. Additionally, some organisations are used to a more professionalised development agency approach and found it hard to fit that kind of content into the form.
- **Involving both partners' voices helps to shift the power and tell complex stories.** People really valued the assessment calls, and the importance of involving the overseas partner as an equal participant in the assessment process. Participants particularly welcomed the opportunity the assessment call provided to clarify issues and to share more detail on aspects of their proposal. Overseas partners are likely to play a greater role in applications if written presentation is not the defining measure of proposals and if there are chances to discuss, revisit and adjust plans subsequently.

"It was a refreshing change even just to note the equal emphasis between Scotland-based and the other applicant. Too often there is more emphasis on the UK-based organisation."

Participant in Pilot Fund.

Who's "doing the work" of communication?

- **The politics and accessibility of language.** There has been a welcome and valuable focus in recent years on de-colonising language and on using inclusive language in the funding sector. Participants involved, especially those overseas, told us they continue to use terms which some funders are now working to avoid. In our efforts to use more conscious and progressive language, we can risk adding to barriers and the power imbalance we are trying to reduce. We need to invest time in explaining what we mean by certain words and phrases, making sure these are clear to all involved.
- **The importance of supportive structures.** The assessment calls were held in English; while all involved were fluent, this was a second language for many and a fourth language for some. Many participants had not had a previous opportunity to speak directly to a funder. In structuring calls, funders should take the responsibility for clarifying the purpose and expectations of the call and help all those participating understand what information we are looking to gather.
- **The value of feedback.** All participants were strongly in favour of receiving feedback on their applications. Participants referred to short emails with key bullet points and a more detailed call to follow. People underlined how valuable it was for them to learn how to improve future proposals. They highlighted that funders need to dedicate resources to providing feedback as it signalled respect for the time of those who apply.

"Too many funders either give no feedback or just generic reasons. Applying for funds is a costly investment and feedback is such a valuable tool and also a respectful part of the process."

Participant in Pilot Fund.

What do we value and whose story are we interested in hearing?

Funders can support good practice and equity by asking for the right information in applications. Broader discussions with participants highlighted other areas to encourage good practice amongst funders in international development.

- Participants highlighted the importance of funders being well-informed about good practice developments in the sector. This helps funders ask relevant questions on key issues (sustainability, participation, safeguarding, etc.) and support applicants and grantholders. Overseas partners particularly valued space to discuss sustainability in proposals.
- Some participants felt frustrated that they needed 'to sell' their work by presenting a story on the Scotland-based partner to increase their chances. Some funders are less interested in progressive community-led initiatives with a strong role for overseas partners.

"It can be really depressing that to get the funds we need we have to forget best practices for some applications... we can't lead with our real, important vision of a new community-owned organisations and instead need to sell the story of a Scottish guy who went out to XXX 10 years ago." **Participant in Pilot Fund.**

Key messages

- It's important to involve all partners at all stages, with overseas partners having space to talk through their plans and work during assessment calls.
- Funders to need provide clear guidelines on their expectations and requirements of grant recipients as this can have resource implications.
- Careful and thoughtful consideration of the language used throughout the application process to ensure it is accessible to all.
- Feedback can help both applicants and funders improve their practice.
- Awareness of good practices in international development is important for funders and organisations
- Open, respectful discussion among funders and partner organisations (UK and overseas) can facilitate exchange and support learning for all involved.

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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