Voices, Relationships and Partnerships in International Development

Learning Process
Insight Briefing Reporting and Relationships – February 2022

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 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.

These short briefings provide insights into what we are hearing from the participants. This briefing focuses on feedback received on progress reporting and related points regarding funder relationships and communication during the implementation of grants. To learn more about the wider International Pilot Fund contact chrissie@corra.scot or elaine@corra.scot.

Why reporting? At Corra we are aware that many organisations find reporting complex and overly bureaucratic. In international grantmaking, reporting to funders is often the responsibility of UK-based partners alone and we were keen to explore if adjusted systems could support more equitable collaboration. As part of the pilot we worked with participants to develop a reporting framework that would help them to tell their story together.

What we did

A draft reporting template based on current UK funder approaches to reporting was shared with participants for their feedback, then revised in accordance with that feedback. The revised report template we then trialled was more tailored to their needs. It included eight questions which required answers and a further three optional questions. It was based on the assumption that progress reporting would be undertaken on a six-monthly basis, sent in online, and with both partners contributing.

We used this template for a round of progress reporting which Corra received and reviewed, sharing feedback on each report with the partnership that had sent it in. Participants were then asked about how they had found the experience of reporting, with final learning points applied to the end-of-grant report template used.

A 'comfortable space' for reporting means different things to different people

People wanted more space to respond to questions in reporting, but not the pressure to fill it. For some, this was about recognizing that summarizing can be harder for non-native English speakers or those who don't undertake such writing tasks regularly. For others this was about making sure they had room to share all the details they felt were important. It was also felt that longer word limits for questions should not convey an expectation that longer answers were

required: participants' suggestion was to allocate word limit brackets to each question so that people would feel comfortable with answers within the set range.

Some people want the option to tell us about more aspects of their work. A number of participants were keen to add additional questions, while others were happy keeping the template more limited. The final template we produced based on participants' inputs aimed to solve this by including optional questions (about a third of the report as a whole), also providing the option to upload different attachments.

Different people will want to report in different ways. While our starting point was to design a common report format, quite diverse organisations and participants were using and giving feedback on the template. We therefore tried to incorporate flexibility on certain questions to recognise the different needs and tools used by organisations: for example, partnerships could upload an updated activity plan and skip narrative input for the question on implementation progress. This allowed those who prefer to use more formal tools to use and share those, while not making this feel like a requirement for others who preferred to organise their work differently.

"Certain questions on the report were optional – this enabled us to comment where we felt we had something valuable to say, rather than feeling obliged to fill in a section."

"We felt able to communicate everything we wanted on the reporting form, and by way of the activities report which we had produced... [providing] this additional information in a format that suits our project monitoring."

Participants in Pilot Fund

Structuring reporting processes differently can help to shift the power

Asking the right questions can promote good practice. Participants were clear that it is important to push for good practice and that the way funders ask questions can support this. They were keen that questions be phrased to prompt for information on **how communities had been involved in leading work**, seeing this as important in prioritising accountability to communities. They were also keen to include questions on sustainability and the environmental impact of the grant, and on notifiable events, for example safeguarding. They felt safeguarding was important to include in regular reports to normalise discussions on this potentially sensitive area, helping to support open and constructive consultation should an issue arise.

Asking explicitly for both partners' voices in reporting can support equity. The expectation that both partner organisations would contribute to reporting and agree on responses to questions was made explicit in the guidance notes we shared to accompany the report. We also included a question which asked each partner organisation separately to share their perspectives on how the grant was going. Participants told us that the ask for both orgs to contribute was helpful and welcomed the sections for separate inputs. They noted this as valuable in re-framing 'classic' systems in which the UK-based partner leads on funder liaison and reporting.

> **Challenges of reporting templates**. While the partners all agreed and welcomed the opportunity to equally contribute to the report, they did acknowledge that collaborating on reporting and then needing to complete an online form increased their workload. It is important as funders we consider the accessibility of the forms we ask people to complete and consider alternative options that are less time consuming.

Opening up the reporting process beyond 'the report' itself. We asked participants if they would value the offer of an informal meeting with both partners and the funder following the report to chat through any issues and next steps. While the additional time burden involved was acknowledged with caution by some Scottish partners (some of which are volunteer-run), this suggestion was welcomed by all overseas partners. Throughout the learning process, feedback from participants has been that opportunities for conversations and **direct contact with the funder are very much valued**, and that when these opportunities are for both partners then they become a valuable space to support equity as well as develop relationships.

"I do think that asking questions in a different way could help to potentially shift thinking. For example, to better understand impact you could ask 'what is the impact communities are telling you they can see'?"

"The question for both organisations in the report was very useful; we used it to spark discussion about how our collaboration was going."
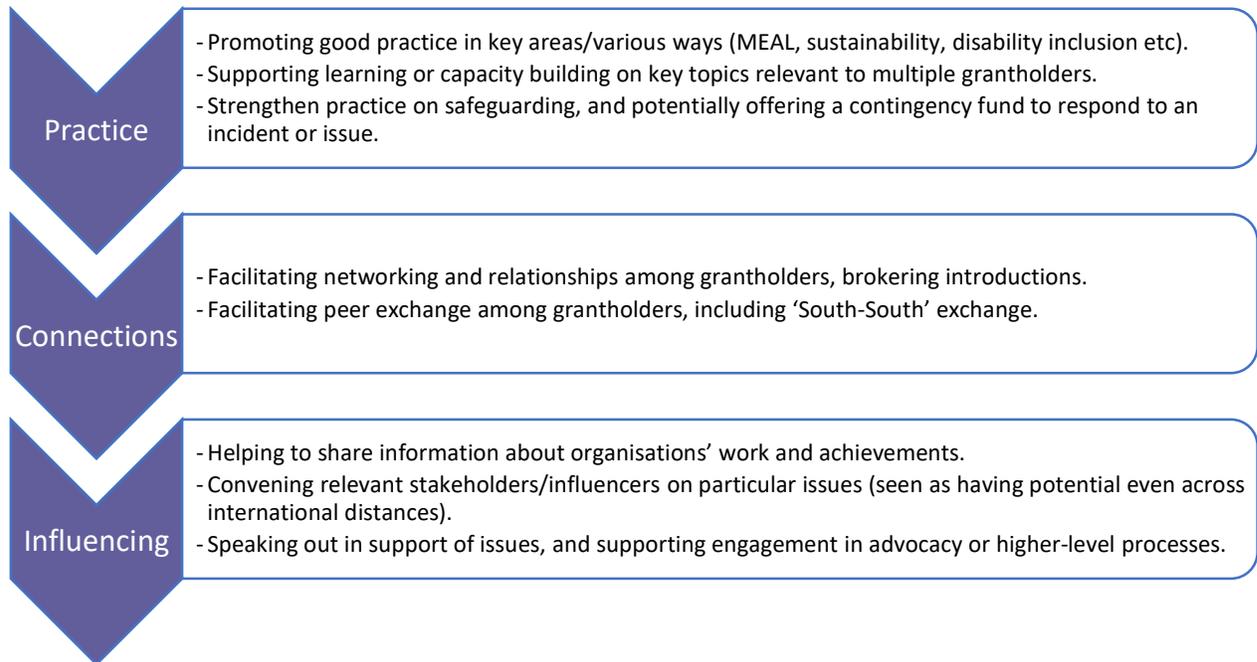
Participants in Pilot Fund

More than just the money, *"it's all about the relationships"*

Both partners value a solid relationship with the funder. Funder liaison is often seen as a typical responsibility for UK partners, but overseas partners participating were keen to be involved in this and also to learn more about the funder and their values and expectations. Participants also felt that trust-based relationships with funders would mean that there is more likely to be flexibility to respond to new needs or learning, that issues such as grant amendments would be more easily addressed, and that communication on sensitive issues such as fraud or safeguarding would be much easier.

Peer exchange among grantholders is very highly valued. All participants were strongly in favour of funders providing opportunities to allow them to share learning and experience. They saw this as extremely beneficial for a number of reasons, including capacity building (which some commented would likely bring better results than formal training). Funder support to create a grantholder platform for honest dialogue was also seen, in the words of one participant, as having "the potential to be a powerful space".

Organisations want more from funders than funds. Participants felt that funders could do more to support their work and the sustainability and success of grants by additional, non-monetary support. This included:

Practice
- Promoting good practice in key areas/various ways (MEAL, sustainability, disability inclusion etc).
- Supporting learning or capacity building on key topics relevant to multiple grantholders.
- Strengthen practice on safeguarding, and potentially offering a contingency fund to respond to an incident or issue.

Connections
- Facilitating networking and relationships among grantholders, brokering introductions.
- Facilitating peer exchange among grantholders, including 'South-South' exchange.

Influencing
- Helping to share information about organisations' work and achievements.
- Convening relevant stakeholders/influencers on particular issues (seen as having potential even across international distances).
- Speaking out in support of issues, and supporting engagement in advocacy or higher-level processes.

Organisations partner for different reasons and organisations bring different strengths and contributions to their joint work. Stereotypes can be dangerous, and funders should be careful they do not inadvertently support assumptions about which organisations hold which kind of expertise or play which roles on a grant. Our discussions with participants highlighted a wide range of reasons why organisations partner, many far from more typical expectations of a relationship limited to funding and 'expertise' flow. Valued functions of partnerships included:

- Access to learning and exchange.
- Political support for advocacy on controversial issues
- Stronger credibility or legitimacy for their work with other stakeholders
- Networking across international communities of practice.
- Global solidarity on social and climate justice.

"We would learn a lot from each other [through peer exchange]... there is benefit for both or all organisations and peers even though they may be at different stages of their work. Some contexts are very different, so the same approaches couldn't be replicated exactly but that doesn't prevent learning from hearing about how others approached a situation – and this can contribute to mutual learning through discussion of the different contexts."

"It's quite 'old' to reaffirm a fund-raising and donor liaison role for UK partners. We are building away from western models and a power-heavy role for UK partners; we are re-structuring, reframing partnerships."

Participants in Pilot Fund

Key messages

- The way reporting questions are framed can encourage good practice and help shift accountability and power towards communities.
- Reporting templates which offer flexibility will allow different people to use reports in a way which is comfortable for them.

- Creating collaborative processes in how we report (written and verbal) can ensure that both partners' voices are heard and contribute to equity.

- Funders building trust-based relationships with both partners can support equity in the partnership as well as successful implementation of the grant.

- Organisations welcomed space to exchange and learn from each other and people really value funder facilitation of opportunities to do this.

- Organisations are keen for 'funder plus' support of different kinds.

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.