

2009 SESSION REPORT

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A slippery fish: Running and evaluating an experimental partnership

Moderator: Günter Gerstberger, Robert Bosch Stiftung

Speakers: Fiona Ellis, former Director Northern Rock Foundation; Cullagh Warnock, Northern Rock Foundation

Session proposed by: Northern Rock Foundation

Günter Gerstberger of the Robert Bosch Stiftung reminded participants that this had been one of the four sessions chosen at auction by EFC AGA and Conference attendees. A ventured guess as to why this was the case included a likely appeal from participants to attend a session focusing on the self-critical factors of running a project, including the sharing of key learnings, which are not the usual stories of success and showcasing which abound in the sector.

The session, structured as a facilitated dialogue between Fiona Ellis, formerly of the Northern Rock Foundation and Cullagh Warnock, also of the Northern Rock Foundation, offered a contrasting perspective between the original expectations of an initiative and the actual outcomes. The session examined the lessons learned from the initiative as well as aspects and factors which could be applied in future projects and in an array of other fields.

Background on the case study:

The case study consisted of a project of the Northern Rock Foundation (NRF) aimed at demonstrating effective ways of supporting victims and reducing the incidence of domestic abuse. A decision of NRF to undertake this ambitious project had stemmed from previous research, careful planning and the will to effectively and positively impact on the lives of victims of domestic violence.

Designed alongside experts, the initiative consisted of a GBP 4 million, five-year initiative on domestic abuse and called for tenders to develop two projects, one each in an urban and rural area, in partnership with as many agencies as possible dealing with some aspect of domestic violence. The project was accompanied by a longitudinal evaluation taking place over a seven-year period.

However, during the course of the project, various challenges were encountered including:

- The turnover of key staff in the agencies involved in the partnerships
- Rapid change of policy and context
- Challenge of partnerships – building trusting and equal relationships among stakeholders
- Overestimation of bidders of evaluation on ability to perform evaluation

The example here portrayed resonated with a large number of the participants of the session who shared their own stories and insights from working with partnerships and evaluation of long-term projects.

Lessons learned:

Some of the lessons from NRF's and other participants' experience included:

- Maximum preparation and written individual protocols are needed from the get go
- Charismatic leaders are no substitution for clear protocol
- Funding generously could dazzle grantees – to keep in mind in such large scale projects
- Problems encountered along the way may be hidden from the foundation for fear of withdrawal of support – building a trusting relationship with grantees is essential for them to be open and transparent about obstacles encountered and seek help when needed

- Some factors (policy, political events, environment) are uncontrollable and may affect evaluation outcomes and results – particularly in long-term projects – the world keeps changing
- Choice of pragmatic solution – development of a good model – may be needed to confront unexpected change, even if some desired outcomes, for example the need to measure success of initiative, may need to be sacrificed
- Bidders may be so eager to please the foundation that their ability to deliver may be overestimated at the outset – such as was the case with evaluation
- Discrepancy between expectations of trustees, staff and grantees – for example with evaluation and how much should be invested in this, overhead costs, etc. A balance of expectations may need to be achieved

Despite the challenges, the experience of the NRF had proven to be a positive one, having achieved adoption of national best practice locally, solving of problems en route, raising the bar and producing learning that was transmitted and shared with other foundations. The evaluation reports, although different than originally expected, turned out some interesting data and many victims of domestic violence were helped.

The session demonstrated the wealth of knowledge produced by foundations running projects and how the sharing of these could be of great benefit to the increase of impact and efficiency in the sector. There was also a consensus among the audience members that the participatory format of the session was extremely effective and should be included in future EFC conferences.