

Grantmaker on the receiving end

Sarah Hobson

It's not often that funders expose themselves to a review of their own performance by their grantees. In the funding world, standard practice is for grantmakers to require performance and outcome evaluation by those receiving the money, not the other way round. Thanks to a grant from the Ford Foundation, International Development Exchange (IDEX) had the chance to turn standard practice upside down. In collaboration with 14 grassroots organizations in Africa, Asia and Latin America, we have just been through a fascinating and extensive process to find out how they feel about the way we work together.



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Among other things, we asked them whether they thought IDEX was carrying out our commitments and to what degree a democratic process was being achieved in the partnership. Over nine months, partners completed two questionnaires, held discussions at regional meetings and gave feedback by email and at an IDEX board meeting. The data was then analysed and the findings fed back to the partners.

The IDEX Partnership Model

Our Partnership Model grew out of 13 years of funding self-help community projects benefiting women, indigenous people and youth in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Frustrated by the limitations of short-term project funding, the difficulties of building an understanding of the specific challenges facing our grantees, and the limited amount of money available to give out in grants, IDEX sought to build long-term partnerships with fewer groups that would also include some kind of non-grantmaking activity. After extensive consultation with NGOs and former grantees in the nine countries where we anticipated having partners, and after much debate within IDEX, the Partnership Model was born in 1999.

From the start, we tried to incorporate democratic processes into the way we worked with our partners. Several guiding principles informed our approach:

Our partners set the pace. The plans and priorities of our partners and the communities they work with to a large extent determine what we do and when we do it.

We jointly develop the methods of working in partnership. We have tried to do this with the input and approval of all our partners. Key components include a two-way partnership

agreement, agreed criteria for selecting new partners, and partner representation on the IDEX board. Each partner determines how the funding will be applied for community projects in their area. All the partners in each region also agree regional objectives to work on together.

We keep each other informed. It is crucial to the success of the partnership that we each know how each other is doing. While we have formal mechanisms for regular two-way monitoring, evaluation and reporting, we place a lot of importance on personal contact, informal communication and understanding the realities of the others' situations.

All our partnership work leads to social change.

While the focus is primarily on creating social change in highly marginalized and threatened communities, all the partners interact with individuals and institutions at many different levels, locally, nationally and internationally. Change at the grassroots cannot happen in isolation. Change is needed at all levels if change at the grassroots is to be sustainable.

Review of the model

The negatives . . .

During the review, we were able to examine in detail the degree to which our principles were being carried out in practice. We received feedback from some of our partners that they felt excluded – or at least not fully included – in the process for selecting new partners and that our selection criteria should be much clearer and more specific. As a result, we have developed a procedure whereby all regional partners nominate organizations in their region and then work with IDEX to screen and select new partners according to a clear and agreed set of criteria. As a result, we have developed a procedure whereby all regional partners nominate, screen and jointly select new partners in their region according to a clear and agreed set of criteria. Based on suggestions from our partners, we are also in the process of updating and narrowing the selection criteria, with much crisper definitions that make it easier to identify groups working on grassroots social change and economic empowerment.

We were heavily criticized for the way we appointed partner representatives to the IDEX board, as we had selected individual partners without consulting the views of others in the region. Partners also expressed dissatisfaction with the way representatives were reporting back to them. Regional partners now

For a copy of IDEX's report on democratic partnership or to become part of the movement for democratic grantmaking, contact Lauren Bartlett at Lauren@idex.org

For more about IDEX, see www.idex.org

nominate their own representatives based on clearly defined responsibilities, one of which is to keep other partners informed on IDEX board matters.

Many partners also expressed unhappiness at the lack of commitment on the part of IDEX as to the number of years a partnership would run. At the time of the review, the majority of our partnerships were in their third year of funding but there was no clarity on what would happen next. IDEX has now developed annual and three-year review processes, whereby we evaluate our own and each other's fulfilment of commitments. We have also agreed that six years is the minimum that a partnership should run, if the group is to have any chance of building their capacity in a meaningful way during the partnership.

The final area of dissatisfaction lay in the slow progress when working together on non-grantmaking activities, particularly alliance building and issue-based activities. Our partners wanted a clearer definition and sense of direction on what we would be working on together, based on their needs and priorities. They also recognized that they had received great value from partner exchanges to learn about each other's work and that partners who had visited the US for fundraising and networking purposes felt it had been very beneficial.

... and the positives

But the feedback wasn't all bad! In fact, it was mostly positive. Overall, the partners liked the emphasis placed on equality, transparency and accountability in the IDEX Partnership Model, and a majority indicated that they were happy with the way it is put into practice. Eleven out of 14 expressed satisfaction with IDEX's communication methods. They found IDEX-to-partner communication to be honest and they trust the relationship. All expressed satisfaction with grant disbursements averaging \$13,000–\$15,000 a year. While the grants for some of our partners are relatively small when compared to other donors, they are nevertheless strategic and very useful.

A wider look at partnership

As we drew near to the end of our review, we became concerned that it could be easily dismissed as an interesting but insignificant study with little relevance to other funders. We therefore identified more than 60 US grantmakers that claimed to work in partnership. Of these, we identified 23 organizations that are making grants to grassroots groups in other parts of the world within some kind of democratic frame-

work. We then conducted a survey of these 23 organizations to find out how they deal with the power dynamic between funder and funded.

Participating organizations ranged from those with a very specific funding focus¹ to those with more broad-ranging grassroots grantmaking programmes.² What emerged was a consistent approach. The great majority did not identify themselves primarily as funders or foundations, indeed they played down their grantmaking role. They named the relationship they had with groups in other parts of the world in terms of 'accompaniment', 'alliance' or 'collaboration'. Openness and mutual accountability were essential ingredients in the relationship. All but two were involved in non-grantmaking activities (such as capacity-building, information sharing, fundraising and advocacy) that played a central role in the partnership. And all recognized the leadership role their partners were playing in creating social change: it was their partners who had the skills and knowledge to accomplish this work. In other words, none of the US organizations mentally positioned themselves 'above' the groups they were funding, but alongside, or in a lesser role.

Now that we're at the end of the review and will be publishing a public report in January 2004, we're looking ahead to where all this leads, beyond the changes we have made within IDEX. One question we would like to address is, relative to top-down funding, what difference does a democratic partnership make? Indications are that while the process can take more time, and may therefore cost more, in the long run it is more effective because it creates deeper social change, so that such change becomes integrated and therefore permanent. Another question is whether the groups that are part of the partnership are applying the same democratic principles to the community groups with whom they partner.

At the recent Grantmakers Without Borders (Gw/oB) Conference in Tucson, Arizona, about 20 grantmakers expressed interest in building on the initiative to promote democratic principles and practices in international grantmaking. Gw/oB offered to circulate the report to all its members and is interested in housing an affinity group to carry out further research and learning activities. Perhaps the words of one of our partners, K'inál Antzetik in Chiapas, Mexico, sums it up: 'There is definitely a sense of being partners in making the work happen and sharing a vision of the world we are trying to construct.' @

¹ Eg American India Foundation, EcoLogic, Global Fund for Children, Global Fund for Women, Katalysis and SHARE: Building a New El Salvador Today.

² Eg Oxfam US, American Friends Service Committee and World Neighbors.