

Sustainable Models of Practice and Legacy Effects

Experiences of Atlantic Philanthropies funding in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

In 2014 the Atlantic Philanthropies funded this action research project in order to both learn from, and support, sustainable practices from more than 20 years of its investments in Northern Ireland. Atlantic commissioned CDS Consulting (2014) to review grantee's work across its three Northern Ireland programmes (ageing; rights and reconciliation; children and young people) to identify sustainability practices, skills and ways of working. This report looks closely at these projects and examines how their very different experiences tell us more about how to sustain progressive social action, especially after a period of grant funding from a donor such as Atlantic has ended. Working across different sectors, with different resources and staffing levels, the report draws on their experiences to identify some of the practices and tactics that have helped to sustain the impact of such projects, programmes and organisations. The projects are set out in the Annex and over the last 12 months they have been engaged in a series of group seminars, debate and individual reflection on their work and how they helped the wider organisation think about sustainability in a broad sense. Each of the learning reports, along with a summary of their impact, is set out in full and is available from our project website along with some other online resources that third sector organisations might find useful.

Sustainability

One of the interesting issues to emerge from the engagement with grantees was the various ways in which sustainability can be understood and developed in the future. For some, the immediate concern is about keeping grant aid coming into the organisation and a number have developed social enterprises approaches in an attempt to diversify their income streams. For others, it is about the sustainability of their impact and how networks, new skills and models of working can scale up their work and even mainstream support within government. FSG Consulting (2013) reflected this diversity by highlighting the need to support and evaluate what they termed Backbone Organisations using 27 indicators under six generic areas: guide vision and strategy; support aligned activities; establish shared measurement practices; build public will; advance policy; and mobilise funding.

The CDS review also set out a framework for supporting sustainable practice which is a useful way to understand the nature of sustainability itself. These include: strategy; finance; operations; human resources; governance; how each supports internal sustainability (is the organisation more viable?); and external sustainability (what impact has it had on problems, priorities and stakeholders?). Sustainability can thus be thought of in terms of a wider range of both business as well as non-economic concepts. Ultimately, however, it is about the outcomes of organisational working and how impact can be sustained (Ní Ógáin et al, 2012). These include: resilience and adaptation and the extent to which the programme or organisation is in a better position to achieve its objectives in a post-grant environment; and replication and scale, which reflects an ability to strengthen the level of performance and repeat programme successes. According to Coffman (2010), scaling-up can also be thought of in terms of programmes; ideas and social innovation; the use of technologies and skills; and policy impact. For a number of grantees the success is about social innovation and using the resources of their various 'users' to create new services, products and opportunities.

This paper summarises the themes emerging from both the group seminars and project meetings along with the individual reflective papers on how each organisation has confronted the challenge of sustaining its work. It is not designed to describe or capture every aspect of each individual grantees impact, but rather, looks to highlight the strategic themes relevant to creating more sustainable practices and projects.

Sustainable practices

Merger and co-location

A number of organisations have attempted to create **more resilient structures** by merging, co-locating or sharing back office services. The creation of AGENI brought together Age Concern and Help the Aged to form a single regional NGO, which also strengthened their capacity to influence at a UK level (where key decisions relating to pensions, retirement and labour market regulation are taken). Similarly, Voypic and Include Youth established Viable to share corporate services including IT, human resources and procurement, as well as building on their complementary functions and areas of work. They were facilitated by Building Change Trust and Collaboration NI, which demonstrates the importance of intermediaries in facilitating closer organisational working. Both cases emphasise the slow, patient, negotiated nature of the process and the need to acknowledge a range of possibilities including informal working, co-location and a full organisational merger. They also stress the need to address the legal implications, due diligence, governance as well as human resource and financial logistics. Some participants have stressed that merger processes can require significant funding in their own right.

Viable and their 4-stage model aims to provide assistance for partners to work through different issues/conflicting viewpoints, to transform them into workable partnerships. To date, partners involved have looked to combine and develop key resources such as finance, human resources, business strategy and administration as well as alternative approaches to fundraising. Developing formal structures and legal frameworks are seen as critical to the successful implementation of each new partnership. For all Viable partnerships, a Joint Venture Agreement, Articles of Association, Policies, Procedures and Service Level Agreements have also been established to ensure that service delivery is consistent and effective in the long term.

Human rights organisations are also being supported by Atlantic to share a single building in order to create both **economies and synergy** within and between the different services they offer. There is a concern that mergers are an externally imposed solution for the convenience of the funder rather than creating the best structure to protect the rights and welfare of the most vulnerable or deprived. Participants agreed that there is no single best approach but that the exploration of such models needs to make sense in terms of service outcomes. AGENI showed that their approach had enabled them to work with others to develop a multi-tiered infrastructure in the age sector. New sub-regional networks have been created through (the Atlantic supported) Modernisation Grant as well as a grant to CFNI which has expanded support to local groups via the Turkington Fund. This infrastructure is aligned with the new

Northern Ireland Super Councils and decision making structures in health and social care to enable more effective advocacy approaches, especially where resource decisions are made.

AGENI place an emphasis on the multiple benefits from merging the activities of Help the Aged and Age Concern NI. Further to increasing the investment capabilities of the organisation, the merger has also provided Age NI with a presence, an infrastructure and the capacity to work more effectively at the local level. For example, through the development of the 'Peer Facilitators social enterprise programme', Age NI has identified an emerging marketplace for quality and peer led engagement with older people, and has already successfully tendered for a series of contracts. These not only represent significant income opportunities, but also have practical value in terms of reaching out and engaging with older people with different capabilities, especially those living with dementia.

Barnardo's argues that **backbone organisations** are therefore becoming increasingly important. This is not to suggest that only large organisations can be successful or viable; clearly diversity of size, skills and flexibility is the strength of the community and voluntary ecosystem. The point here, as illustrated by the PATHS project, is that it depends on the purpose or what outcome is desired. Whether organisations are large or small, rigorous systems, the right mix of skills and experience, and contingency planning are central to sustainable practice. As this case demonstrates all organisations need such backbone services to deliver effective outcomes, whether they are in austerity conditions or not.

Barnardo's also draws on the importance of mergers as a way of delivering more effective outcomes. Previously managed by Together for All, the PATHS programme was scaled up in 2011 to become part of Barnardo's portfolio of evidence-based programmes. On completion of the merger, Barnardo's successfully secured an additional Big Lottery Realising Ambition grant. This supported the five-year UK wide expansion of the PATHS PLUS project, which aimed to create friendship groups for children with social and emotional difficulties. Further to securing additional financial resources, the merger has ultimately placed the PATHS programme within a 'backbone' organisational framework. This has improved systems and skills, creating a more resilient framework to support the development of the programme in the long term.

Mainstreaming service provision

A number of grantees have also had success across the three programmes in **mainstreaming services or partnering with government** and other funders to scale their work. The Stormont House Agreement had included a capital investment of £500m in shared and integrated education to be delivered over ten years. It is just one illustration of how effective campaigning has levered significant resource commitments. Some participants also point out that there is a need to value bricolage by pulling together small pots of funding in order to sustain a meaningful project. These types of approaches are likely to become more significant in an environment where resources are increasingly limited. However, it can be difficult for some projects to gain traction where an approach does not fit neatly into a particular policy category or organisation. Social innovation invariably means interdisciplinary and inter-organisational working. Projects such as the intergenerational practice developed by Linking Generations cuts across health, ageing, justice and community development, therefore making it difficult to find a policy home, clear ownership and accountability within public policy.

Linking Generations (NI) places an emphasis on how small grants allow them to deliver effective, short-term interventions at the local and neighbourhood scale. Working with the Public Health Agency, LGNI supported over 1000 people across Northern Ireland in 2014 to celebrate the 'EU day of solidarity between generations'. While these events raise public awareness and promote the benefits of intergenerational working, LGNI fear that increasingly limited funding opportunities represent a barrier to tackling age segregation. LGNI are trying to collaborate with local organisations so that they are able to add value to community projects, policy development and programme delivery. In 2015, LGNI worked alongside the Police and Community Safety Partnerships to explore how intergenerational approaches can help tackle neighbourhood issues linked to crime, fear and public safety. They also collaborated with sheltered housing accommodation providers to offer digital inclusion workshops and partnered with local schools to help develop understanding between older people and the wider community.

Some grantees have been successful in developing new legislation, governance structures and policies as well as adopting programmes often 'tested out' by the sector in the first instance. Some of the social economy measures, including access to the labour market and social entrepreneurship, have been picked up by government, local funders and other philanthropists. The Fermanagh Trust point out that their work in *area planning* processes demonstrate the significant savings that can be generated by a more efficient use of the school estate, reducing revenue costs whilst at the same time enhancing the quality of education. However, they also point out that monitoring is critical to ensuring that these commitments are delivered in practice. Part of sustaining social action is about maintaining scrutiny over *DELIVERY* as well as the formation of policies.

The Fermanagh Trust has worked hard to mainstream initiatives such as the Delivering Social Change (DSC) Shared Education Project. Although considered one of the major vehicles for mainstreaming shared education across Northern Ireland, there are a number of factors that will be critical to its long-term success. In addition to political support from the Department of Education and external funding assistance from Atlantic, effective delivery will require regular monitoring and evaluation as the mainstreaming process unfolds.

Sustainability and social economics

A number of projects used social enterprise models to **diversify income streams** and reduce their reliance on government grants. STEP stressed the importance of assets as collateral on which to secure further funding and create a degree of independence in their advocacy work.

STEP demonstrates the importance of asset-based social enterprise development to secure a more sustainable future for social and community development programmes. With funding from Atlantic, STEP established a trading company, *STL*, which aims to diversify income streams through the delivery of training, translation and interpreting services linked to migrant workers and property development. Exploring the potential and feasibility of developing more community enterprises will be a priority for STEP during 2016. However, this will only happen when sustainable income generation from the asset development has been secured.

Atlantic has also supported start-up Social Enterprises, Intermediate Labour Markets, Social Entrepreneurship and new forms of Social Finance in an integrated programme on ageing, as well as emphasising the importance of co-production in Time Banks. These involve older people, trading services and facilities on a reciprocal basis in a way that creates trust, interdependencies and services that meet older people's everyday needs. There is concern that many of these initiatives are simply downloading risk to the community sector and enabling the state to withdraw expenditure from various forms of welfare. Participants also stress the inevitable ethical tensions in such decisions, the need to identify who sets the agenda, what it means for organisational aims (and the potential for mission drift) and the compromises implicit in accepting project funding in this arena.

The **Social economy programme** aims to develop new skills, social finance, entrepreneurship, labour market access and social enterprises in the age sector. Integrating these projects and creating an alternative economic arena to supply services to older people will ultimately take time, resources and additional government support. Experimental projects such as the Bryson Handyperson home improvement pilot have important demonstration value and could be up-scaled in the medium term, especially given the size and strength of the Bryson Charitable Group. The social economy has the potential to offer new services in the context of austerity, help sustain voluntary organisations and create more independent NGOs in ageing and other sectors.

It also raises the importance of **valorising the social effects** of projects. A number of organisations have used Social Return On Investment (SROI) techniques to demonstrate the costs savings generated by their interventions. The Bryson Handyperson pilot generated a SROI of £1.34 for every £1 invested in the pilot project. This took into account reduced costs associated with falls in the home, reduced reliance on the health service and assisting some of the most vulnerable out of fuel poverty. It is not just about achieving sustainability but demonstrating that outcomes are more sustainable in measurable and legitimate ways. Increasingly, grantees highlight the need for a different set of metrics that captures the full benefit of their work to a range of stakeholders as well as including cost savings and efficiencies for government. A culture has been created whereby NGOs, in particular, feel they are absorbing development costs, risks and time to tackle difficult social problems that the state or private agencies cannot or have not. The prototyping of risky interventions in criminal justice, school performance or care in the community is thus not properly accounted for or rewarded in government funding contracts and grant programmes. For a number of grantees their work has been more about social innovation and testing concepts to tackle stubborn problems that are thus capable of achieving long term benefits. How such approaches are rewarded and accounted for is important in sustaining projects and their long term impact.

Knowledge and the learning organisation

A recurrent theme across the various different programmes and projects is the importance of evidence, in the form of structured research, evaluation exercises or action based projects. Research that has been undertaken has:

- Enabled the effective and efficient targeting of programmes;
- Clearly defined critical issues;
- Enabled organisations to build on and share best practice;
- Justified more evidentially what works;
- Explained mistakes or limitations;
- Developed a more effective case for certain types of intervention.

The methodological scope is also becoming increasingly more sophisticated with grantees using Random Control Trials, longitudinal research, participatory action methods as well as social attitudes measurement of the Northern Ireland population. Others have trained peer researchers and evaluators and democratised the research process in more ethical and user orientated ways. These have been used to capture everyday experiences and exclusions across the three Atlantic programmes to build a stronger case for policy attention. Research partnerships between universities, NGOs and practitioners have developed the methodological rigour, relevance and impact of data. New university institutions (especially in the children's sector at Queen's University Belfast) has repositioned Northern Ireland as a leader in this type of work.

Queen's University has been supported to develop the evidence base around children's lives, the impact of early intervention work and to evaluate a range of initiatives across Atlantic's Northern Ireland programmes. This has helped staff to focus on research; appoint new lectureships; and create a suite of new interdisciplinary postgraduate Masters level courses. This has now been recognised by the university, which is continuing to support and build up this area of research. Academics have been able to internationalise the research agenda and generate a significant impact on practice, policy and global scholarship.

The age sector has also seen research capacity strengthen on a North-South basis, with collaborative ventures between NGOs and universities as well as a new 10-year longitudinal study focusing on older people's lives (NICOLA). The range of evidence that has been developed, the **different types of knowledge** and how it has been used have unquestionably sustained interventions in each respective area. There was, however, some frustration that demonstrable evidence of success, which is demanded of the sector, does not always translate into commitments from government. A number of grantees emphasised some frustration at the need, not just to gather various forms of data, but to 'translate' them more effectively to build a better case for securing resources, changes in policy or support for particular methods and practices.

Beyond using research as a resource, grantees have used data and evaluations to reflect on their own practices in both formal and informal ways to strengthen organisational performance, the competencies of staff, ways of working and the long term vision for the organisation. The anticipation for some that their work 'might be done' and that they need to either 'move out or move on' reflects a **commitment to reflective learning**. There have been, however, divergent views about the uncertain future of government funding and the potential to mainstream projects or programmes within the public sector in particular. It was noted that some grantees had success in getting their approach adopted, including specific funding commitments. Some were optimistic that new local authorities would grant aid or contract relevant services. Others, however, felt that "we are sleepwalking through austerity" and that the sector, corporately, was not fully prepared for the scale of funding withdrawal, not just to voluntary sector organisations but to the most vulnerable across society who rely most on state services.

Financial infrastructure

The Integrated Education Fund, Human Rights Fund and the Charity Bank older people's programme show that **sustaining financial infrastructure** has been important across programmes in creating more sustainable, long-term, revolving funds, some of which are independent of grant aid. Capitalising such funds is not easy. They also raise challenges on the demand side. For example, the Charity Bank loan fund has drawn attention to skills deficits, the need to improve investment readiness and to build the scale of organisations to create viable projects and manage debt as well as grants. This has also highlighted the need to think about scaling-up more independent sources of finance, fiscal instruments (such as the new Social Investment Tax Relief, SITR) and stronger use of endowment and donor funds. Again, it was pointed out that this will not suit all projects and the push towards loan finance represents challenges for smaller organisations without the capacity to repay debt. However, it does highlight the need to think about more 'independent' forms of social finance for the sector, what this means for its ethical base and the practical implications for reducing grant reliance.

Integrated Education Fund (IEF) has demonstrated the value of activities that extend beyond sustaining long-term funding and financial support. *SOFT LOBBYING* practices and regular engagement with Department of Education officials has helped them to secure more resources towards integrated education. These advocacy practices have also increased wider media support and have ultimately generated greater public awareness and heightened political debate around the issue, especially during negotiations around the Stormont House Agreement in 2014. IEF has also used Judicial Review litigation to successfully challenge the decision of the Department of Education to refuse the expansion of Drumgragh Integrated College in Omagh. Litigation has subsequently been used by a number of other groups connected to integrated education across Northern Ireland, including the parents of Clintyclay Primary School in Tyrone, who are currently seeking transformation to integrated status in preference to closure of the school.

Network power

Solidarity within and between sectors, with academia and people as activists is a critical resource in sustaining practice and building political momentum around advocacy issues. The Older People's Parliament (supported by regional parliaments) provides a new governance arena to place people at the heart of lobbying, defining and prioritising their concerns and shaping specific campaigns around critical issues such as fuel poverty, pension reform and fear of crime. These align with the AGENI sub-regional age networks that now map onto the 11 new local authorities and Community Planning processes. The Shared Education Forum also illustrates the capacity of the sector to create and sustain cross-cutting alliances including NGOs, professionals and practitioners to push for resource commitments, the new skills authority and a regulatory framework that encourages sharing and integration.

Age Sector Platform has developed the Pensioner's Parliament to enable older people to engage with key government decision makers to voice issues that are important to them. This opportunity to participate has increased confidence, advocacy skills and a capacity to lobby for new services as well as supportive policies. In 2014, the *Pensioner's Trust* was established to raise funds to support Age Sector Platform and sustain the advocacy practices that emerged through the Pensioner's Parliament. Target audiences for the Trust have included the general public, pensioners and local businesses. Despite fairly limited fundraising capacity, income raised from donations has exceeded the initial targets set by the Trust. Going forward, the Age Sector Platform feels that with a more broadly based fundraising strategy, there is potential to attract private and corporate donors as well as contributions from older people themselves.

The projects also reveal a wide range of **advocacy practices** that are critical to maintaining the sustainability of a project, programme or set of social outcomes. Placing people at the heart of advocacy campaigns that affect their lives, structured research and new governance spaces have been described earlier. However, organisations have also used more confrontational approaches outside traditional lobbying tactics. The use of Judicial Reviews (such as in education) demonstrates the value of public litigation to advance and sustain impact. There has been important progress on legislative protection for older people in the provision of Goods, Facilities and Services. The integration of skills and expertise to create more effective practices and the need to adopt more confrontational approaches in the context of austerity are likely to become an increasingly important feature of advocacy and lobbying.

Skills and resources

Some networks have developed new and challenging relationships and models of practice. Restorative justice projects were controversial, untested and mistrusted by some, but have since established credibility, a track record for delivery and acceptance, especially by the police and housing agencies. They are now audited by the *Criminal Justice Inspectorate*, have been independently validated and have gained legitimacy in the communities in which they are located. They are also risky and operate in often dangerous contexts but are critical to conflict transformation in Northern Ireland in a way that has attracted national and international attention. Such approaches are at the cutting edge of the political transition being experienced in the most divided, violent and poorest communities.

NI Alternatives has developed a suite of programmes based on models of restorative justice that have the potential to be made commercially available to the wider market. Managed and operated as social enterprises these programmes, such as the Education based restorative justice programme, has enhanced the skills of people living and working in some of Northern Ireland's most divided and deprived communities. Tailored to both staff and children in post-primary education, this bespoke programme offers preventative group and social work activities; anti-racism and anti-sectarianism training; and mediation practices to build stronger community relations.

Interdisciplinary approaches are also critical to sustaining effective practice. A number of grantees have worked in a collaborative way to interconnect their skills, knowledge and experience to tackle complex problems. Linking Generations has helped to develop an Intergenerational Toolkit, UnLtd has worked with NESTA to create Rooted as a guide to older social entrepreneurs and Barnardo's has applied and developed the PATHS® approach for educators and counsellors. The International Network on Peace Building with Young Children is led by Early Years. It aims to embed the approach in the Master's degree programme on conflict management and resolution. The Early Years International Toolkit Manual supports practitioners in a range of societies emerging from ethnic violence.

Global reach

Clearly these approaches have attracted **international attention** but grantees are involved in a wide range of global projects around children, dementia and human rights. Academic partners and NGOs have been able to attract world renowned scholars and think-tanks by the quality and effectiveness of their work. This has helped legitimise approaches, create a deeper understanding of the issues and connect organisations to opportunities in other countries. Early Years has developed effective working relationships with the Balkans, Cambodia and there is Chinese interest in the impact of intervention in childhood education in particular. The various practices linked to both the conflict, but also to other life-course challenges, demonstrate the international significance of projects and the potential to capitalise more effectively on the experiences of those actually delivering change. This includes more effective charging and pricing of services both locally and globally.

Early Years has scaled its work by leading an International Network on Peace Building with Young Children. This network involves participants from children's organisations, teachers, specialists, practitioners and academics working overseas in other conflict and post-conflict regions. They are developing an international toolkit that supports practice and research innovation in the field of peacebuilding focusing on children and education. In Northern Ireland, Early Years also aims to build a centre for excellence based in North Belfast, which will offer a shared platform for children's services, conferences and practice based on their regional and international experiences.

Implications for sustaining investment

Clearly, there is an emerging issue about grant support and how participants will deliver their work given public and EU funding pressures. Trading, contracts and social enterprises can only go so far. There is a concern that the infrastructure, resources, skills and innovation will be lost or significantly reduced in the absence of longer-term support. The issues that have been identified here are not exclusive but it would be useful to help think through the sustainability journey in the context of challenges and opportunities raised by the participants. These include:

- A. How intermediaries, critical friends and resources have helped to facilitate change management processes. Atlantic has capitalised social finance, supported investment readiness and identified intermediary functions to help organisations access loans. This may or may not help all grantees but calls for a different set of skills, support and technical assistance that people have used or intend to use in order to help strengthen organisational resilience in the face of an increasingly punitive and competitive funding environment.
- B. Mergers, formal contracts and collaborative arrangements are an increasing feature of the community and voluntary sector. For some, they have improved service delivery to the most excluded, created efficiencies and increased service capacity but may not be applicable for all organisations or projects. However, the extent to which collaborative working has been or could be a feature of work is an area that most have reflected on, especially where it has enabled an integrated approach, developed partnerships on research projects or enhanced access to specific expertise/skills. The development of strong backbone services, systems, expertise and ways of working are central to the survival of all organisations regardless of their size.
- C. This also raises an issue about who drives mergers; is it for the convenience of funders or does it really benefit service delivery. The outcomes are also relevant; does resource competition hamper the capacity to impact on the most excluded and vulnerable? The ethical implications of mergers, as well as other modes of sustainability, packaging services for sale, developing social enterprises, charging for services, bidding for and delivering contracts are increasingly likely to be a feature of strategic decision making in the future.
- D. A number of grantees argued that there needs to be a more open debate about the future of the sector and in particular the relationship with government (and various state funding agendas). Some projects point out that this does not just relate to resources but to the whole renegotiation of welfare and sustained cuts in public spending. What role the sector will play, how it can be sustained with increasing waves of cuts (often at short notice) across sectors and the need to work through contingencies are becoming more pressing issues. Here, all the participants highlighted the importance of a collective approach that avoided competition between organisations and sectors but stressed that the sector (not external donors or government) needed to prepare in solidarity in a more planned way.

- E. In this respect, a number of projects highlighted the potential of *social innovation* and the creation of new ideas, concepts and technologies to address social need, especially in the context of uncertain futures. For some, it is merely the latest buzz phrase but others point out that it has value in thinking where the next generation of programmes and projects might come from, whether we can think more radically about service provision and how to use technology in more socially inclusive ways.

- F. Linked to this, is the way in which organisations demonstrate social value to external funders, users, sponsors and potential investors. A number of projects have invested in evaluation methods, social return on investment techniques and financial leverage metrics. There has been an increased use of *OUTCOME BASED FUNDING* systems, although a number of grantees raise the applicability of such approaches for more complex interventions. The concept of reporting against what has changed, how value has been added and the distinctive value that organisations add needs to be better evidenced.

Annex Participating grantees

Best Practice Case Studies – Ageing Programme

Age NI;
Age Sector Platform;
Social Economy Grant cluster;
Linking Generations Northern Ireland (LGNI).

Best Practice Case Studies – Children and Young Programme

Barnardo's Paths Project;
Voice of Young People in Care / Include Youth (VIABLE);
Early Years;
Queen's University of Belfast – Improving Children's lives.

Best Practice Case Studies – Rights and Reconciliation

Integrated Education Fund;
South Tyrone Empowerment Programme;
Northern Ireland Alternatives;
Fermanagh Trust Shared Education Project.

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