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# Partnership With Government: An Exit Strategy for Philanthropies?

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Keywords: Atlantic Philanthropies, exit strategy, Delivering Social Change, Northern Ireland

## Introduction

Atlantic Philanthropies is a limited-life foundation that has been making grants since 1982 in eight countries. In 2002 the foundation announced its intention to distribute all of its assets and close down by 2020; by that point it will have granted an estimated \$7.7 billion worldwide, the largest exercise in limited-life philanthropy to date. Atlantic Philanthropies has described its philosophy in the following way: “Our goal, simply put, is to do as much good as possible, for as many disadvantaged and vulnerable people as possible, as soon as possible” (2005, p. 3). Underpinning this general goal is a particular focus on tackling global inequalities and injustice. The founder of Atlantic Philanthropies, Chuck Feeney, imbued the foundation with his personal philosophy of “giving while living” to achieve profound social change during his lifetime.

This article will examine Atlantic’s work in Northern Ireland, where since 1991 it has supported three thematic intervention areas: aging; children and young people; and reconciliation and human rights. Across these program areas some basic working principles applied: tackle the root causes, rather than the symptoms, of disadvantage; lever new or match funding for interventions; and mainstream successful policy and practice across Northern Ireland and beyond. Atlantic’s funding approach involved supporting key nongovernmental organizations to drive and advocate for change. As part of its exit strategy, Atlantic Philanthropies has moved to partnering with the power-sharing Northern

## Key Points

- This article is a case study of Atlantic Philanthropies’ work in Northern Ireland, where it supported three thematic intervention areas: aging; children and young people; and reconciliation and human rights. Atlantic, a limited-life foundation that has been making grants since 1982 in eight countries, will close down by 2020 and is engaged in an exit strategy.
- Atlantic’s original funding approach involved supporting key nongovernmental organizations to drive and advocate for change; its work helped to support and consolidate the peace process in that country. Its exit strategy has involved a formal partnership arrangement with the Northern Ireland Assembly to take external interventions to scale and mainstream services previously funded through NGOs.
- This article draws on qualitative data gathered through interviews with key stakeholders — the funder, government officials, and NGOs — and considers the consequences of this approach for sustaining and mainstreaming policies and practices. It also offers both specific and general lessons on partnering with government as an exit strategy.

Ireland Assembly, a radical shift in both strategic and operational terms.

Based on reflective practice, this article will examine Atlantic Philanthropies’ move from a bottom-up external funder that worked through

NGOs to a top-down, insider, partnership role with the government of Northern Ireland. It will also draw on qualitative data gathered through interviews with key stakeholders — the funder, government officials, and NGOs — and consider the consequences of this approach for sustaining and mainstreaming policies and practices. The article concludes with an examination of the lessons learned from partnering with government as an exit strategy: Atlantic's role changed from funding NGOs to advocate for policy change outside government to one in which Atlantic is actively collaborating with government. The aim is to capture the learning from actors directly involved in the partnership process. What is offered is a formative overview of issues considered important by the stakeholders based on early reflections on their experience with Atlantic's exit strategy. Interviewees remain anonymous and no reference is made to their host departments for reasons of confidentiality; within Northern Ireland's small policy community, members could otherwise identify respondents who gave freely of their time and opinions in good faith.

### The Northern Ireland Context

The context of Atlantic's work in Northern Ireland is important in understanding the role it has played. The island of Ireland was partitioned in 1921, with the southern 26 counties gaining independence from Britain and the remaining six counties in the northeast remaining part of the United Kingdom. The new state of Northern Ireland had a Protestant majority (roughly 65 percent at the time of partition) and acquired its own parliament and considerable autonomy within the U.K. A chronically insecure Protestant majority, an alienated Catholic minority, electoral malpractice, ethnic bias in the distribution of housing and welfare services, and a declining economy meant that the state could never command full political legitimacy. During the 1960s a civil rights movement began to campaign for more equitable access to political power, social provision, and cultural recognition. It met with resistance and divisions within unionism — those with allegiance to the U.K.

Politics spilled onto the streets. In 1969 the London government deployed the British army in an attempt to restore order. By the mid-1990s, more than 3,500 people had been killed. Between 1974 and the cease-fires of 1994 there were seven attempts to reach a political and constitutional settlement. All of the initiatives were London-led and included an element of power-sharing between Catholics and Protestants; all foundered in the face of local opposition. The first moves toward peace progressed along two parallel routes: Route one sought to maintain momentum between the constitutional parties; route two saw the first tentative moves to involve republicans (supporters of a united Ireland) in talks. On Aug. 31, 1994, the Irish Republican Army declared "a complete cessation of military operations" and the main loyalist paramilitary organizations followed its example in October, paving the way to the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement of April 1998 (Darby, 2003).

The Ulster Unionist Party agreed to share power with Sinn Fein (the republican political party) on the condition that it decommission its weapons; Sinn Fein didn't do so, and the Assembly (established under the 1998 agreement) was suspended in February 2002. This fitful process was to continue, and devolution was suspended indefinitely for the fourth time by Northern Ireland's secretary of state in October 2002 due to a "lack of trust and loss of confidence on both sides of the community" (Reid 2002). A political breakthrough came in the form of the St Andrews Agreement in October 2006. Northern Ireland has enjoyed a period of political stability since 2007 and a significant decline in political violence, although legacy issues around flags, parading, and otherwise dealing with the past continue to dog political progress. While regularly described as a post-conflict society, peace remains fragile not least because of such issues as the highly segregated nature of Northern Ireland on ethno-national grounds and the lack of political consensus on how to deal with the past. There also remains an insidious undercurrent of dissident loyalist (Protestant) and republican (Catholic) activities aimed at vulnerable communities, where those factions exercise greatest influence.

**TABLE 1** Timeline of Atlantic's Work in Northern Ireland

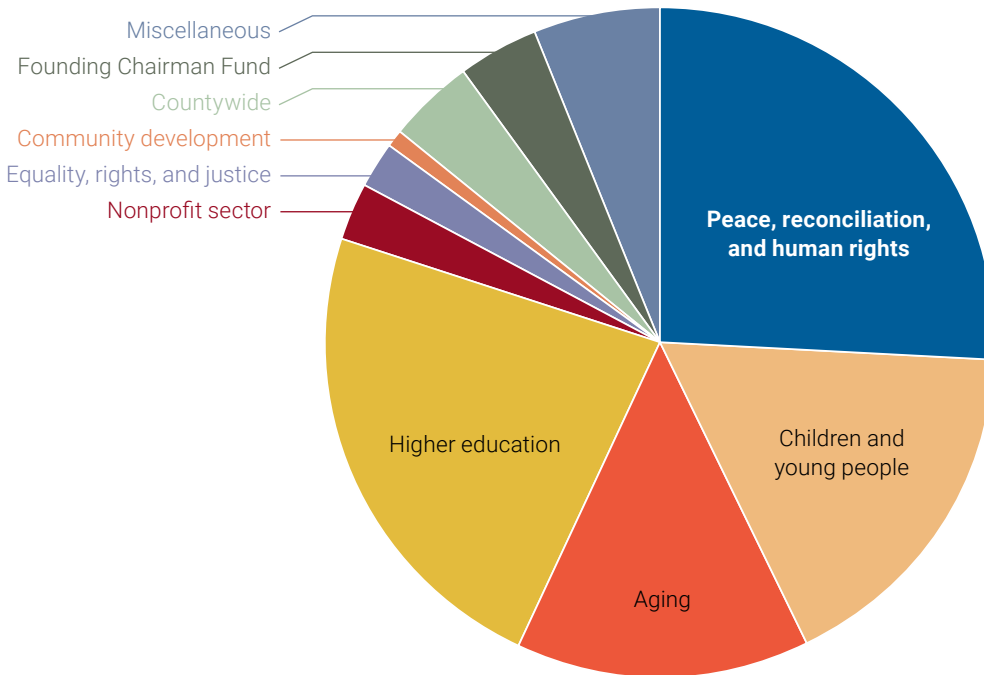
<b>1990</b>	No political settlement	Atlantic makes its first grant in Northern Ireland (from Dublin office), for low-risk, cross-community peace-building work.
<b>1993–95</b>	Downing Street Declaration  IRA cease-fire	Chuck Feeney negotiates with Sinn Fein (republican party) on funding a Washington office to promote a political alternative to violence.  Atlantic establishes in office in Belfast.
<b>1998</b>	Good Friday/Belfast Agreement	A shift in Atlantic's work supports higher-risk reforms in policing, justice, and dealing with the legacy of the past.
<b>2001–02</b>	Northern Ireland Assembly suspended	Atlantic supports building research capacity in higher education.
<b>2003–14</b>	2007: Power-sharing Assembly restored  2014: Stormont House Agreement	Atlantic's role is in cementing peace through interventions in aging; children and youth; and reconciliation and human rights.
<b>2014–present</b>	Fresh Start political agreement on power sharing	Atlantic partners with the Northern Ireland government.  Atlantic's Belfast office closes (2016).  A strategic decision by its board will end all Atlantic grant-making by 2016 and close it by 2020.

Virtually all of Atlantic Philanthropies' work in Northern Ireland can be traced back to Chuck Feeney's overarching desire to help build a lasting, sustainable peace and to reconcile deeply divided communities. Feeney's distress over the violence in Northern Ireland became particularly acute on Nov. 8, 1987, when an IRA bomb placed at a British war memorial killed 11 people attending a remembrance service in the town of Enniskillen, close to his ancestral home. Feeney saw the gruesome aftermath on television while in London and said that he wanted to see peace, in his lifetime, in Northern Ireland (O'Clery, 2007). Starting in 1990, Atlantic began making grants in Northern Ireland, for the first five years from its Dublin office. At a time of intense and continuing political violence, funding opportunities were limited. Atlantic supported noncontroversial cross-community and cross-border contact and dialogue aimed at broadening political debate (Atlantic Philanthropies, 2015). Throughout more than 2 1/2 decades

of grantmaking in Northern Ireland, Atlantic Philanthropies sought to address the legacy of violent conflict that prevented movement toward reconciliation, stability, and the protection of human rights. (See Table 1.)

### Atlantic Philanthropies in Northern Ireland

The role of Atlantic Philanthropies in Northern Ireland has received almost no attention in the literature. Jung, Harrow, and Phillips examined community foundations across the U.K., which they define "as independent philanthropic organisations working in a specific geographic area which build up a permanent collection of endowed funds contributed by many donors" (2013, p. 411; see also, Daly, 2008). The only foundation referenced in Northern Ireland, Community Foundation of Northern Ireland (CFNI), makes grants to meet a wide variety of needs in its service area. While recognizing

**FIGURE 1** Atlantic Philanthropies' Grants in Northern Ireland: 1991–2015

Source: Atlantic Philanthropies (2015)

the absence of high-net-worth donors in Northern Ireland, Jung, et al. noted that the position of CFNI was “greatly enhanced by major funding from Atlantic Philanthropies” (2013, p. 420) and the European Union’s Peace and Reconciliation Fund. Beyond that, there has been no in-depth academic examination of the significant role played by Atlantic Philanthropies in Northern Ireland.

During the period 1991–2015, Atlantic Philanthropies awarded 618 grants totaling about \$603 million in Northern Ireland; the average grant was around \$976,000. (See Figure 1.) To put the total grants provided by Atlantic into perspective in the context of public-sector spending, the Northern Ireland public expenditure budget is around \$12 billion per year. Hence, over the lifetime of Atlantic Philanthropies’ involvement in Northern Ireland it has provided grants equal to approximately 3.6 percent of one year’s public expenditure budget.

In the areas of peace, reconciliation, and human rights specifically, it spent almost \$156 million, or 26 percent of its total funding for Northern Ireland. This was the largest percentage of its spending, followed by grants to higher education, at 22.5 percent; children and young people, at 16.8 percent; and aging, at 13.5 percent. The remainder of the funding was spent on a variety of areas, including community development and civic engagement, youth development, early childhood development, and strategic learning and evaluation.

Spending patterns in Northern Ireland reflected the wider move by Atlantic Philanthropies from 2007–09 to support a social-justice framework broadly characterized as focusing on the root causes of inequality, which perpetuate disparities in power and access and which can be addressed only through systemic and institutional change (LaMarche, 2009; Proscio, 2010, 2012). This approach captured the mood of political change

in Northern Ireland. The political settlement synonymous with the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in 1998 resulted in a power-sharing devolved government, but there remained many of the underlying issues that gave rise to the conflict. As noted by Gara LaMarche, then chief executive of Atlantic Philanthropies, how the social framework applies in Northern Ireland “might lead us to see all of our work through the lens of whether it serves to perpetuate peace through supporting emerging political and social structures that encourage the integration of a deeply divided society” (2009, p. 3).

Atlantic’s role in supporting a social-justice model appeared at odds with the pattern of spending in the field of American philanthropy (National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, 2003, 2005; Jagpal & Laskowski, 2011). Suárez’s research, for example, indicated that larger private foundations were much less likely to discuss social justice than public foundations for fear of “drawing attention to their work by using potentially contentious language like social justice and social change in their programming” (2012, p. 272). Conversely, those foundations that mentioned “social justice or social change in their programming reject the legal and normative restrictions on social action, sending signals to activist grant seekers that their ideas and tactics are welcome”; as a consequence, foundations become “institutional entrepreneurs, pushing the broader philanthropic community to reconsider funding strategies and acceptable priorities” (p. 273).

Although broadly informed by a social-justice framework, it is perhaps a more accurate assessment that Atlantic Philanthropies adopted a generic theory of change in Northern Ireland that had unwritten principles: judiciously select well-respected NGOs, set broad parameters for the social changes sought, provide them with resources to effect change, build their capacity to advocate through the use of robust evidence funded by Atlantic, and take their pilot projects to scale. In that sense, the wider theory-of-change agenda was to build from the bottom up, and Atlantic’s role was, as one Atlantic interviewee said, one of “leading from

behind” and “oiling the wheels of high-level advocacy” where its positional and financial clout added value to the work of NGO groups. There is no consensus within Atlantic on whether such an approach demonstrated clear intentionality or if those loose parameters simply offered the space for flexibility in the highly volatile political environment that is Northern Ireland. What became clearer as Atlantic’s funding in Northern Ireland shifted to reflect the wider concerns of building peace is that it sought to “normalize” society through tackling social and religious inequalities that had fueled the violence and left those impacted by the conflict most vulnerable (Beirne & Knox, 2014; Borooah & Knox, 2014). Atlantic points to a range of successes across the thematic areas it supported. (See Table 2.)

While these achievements cover a number of issues, a set of core themes and approaches emerge from the work of Atlantic Philanthropies. Atlantic has always sought to build and consolidate peace in Northern Ireland — from early support for organizations involved in dialogue (former combatants) through challenging work with those on the margins and on to large-scale partnership investments in shared education. It sought ways to use Atlantic’s unique position and perspective to encourage moves toward a more peaceful and stable society. As Atlantic staff envisioned how to make lasting impact with its work, the final phase of grantmaking in Northern Ireland, from 2014 onward, focused on working with government to enshrine the most successful models the foundation’s grantees had helped develop. We examine this exit strategy in some detail.

### The Exit Strategy: Partnering With Government

The interface between government and philanthropy has received limited attention in the European literature. Smyllie, Scaife, and McDonald (2011), for example, argue that for some philanthropic organizations, the willingness of government to subsidize or fund projects initiated by philanthropy is a measure of success. Whether this happens can depend on the nature and form of the particular welfare state. European foundations see value in partnering

**TABLE 2** Atlantic Philanthropies: Key Successes in Northern Ireland

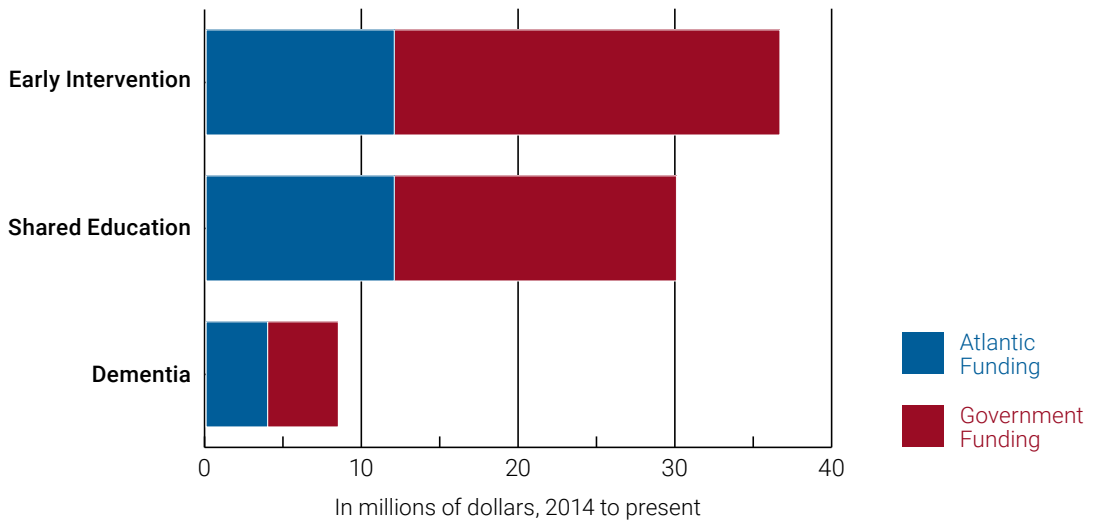
<b>Reconciliation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Programs of shared services were developed at hostile “interface” communities, improving delivery on issues such as early years and parenting, cyber-bullying, and youth engagement for many individuals and families.</li> <li>▶ The number of integrated schools and preschools (where Catholics and Protestants are taught together) nearly doubled, from 49 to 90, and the number of students being educated in integrated schools nearly tripled, from 7,000 to 21,000.</li> <li>▶ In 2016, some 325 schools (one-third of all schools) were actively involved in shared education, engaging 17,000 pupils.</li> <li>▶ The shared-education model was replicated in the deeply divided societies of Macedonia and Israel-Palestine, disseminating lessons learned from Northern Ireland.</li> </ul>
<b>Human Rights</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Downing Street Declaration</li> <li>▶ IRA cease-fire</li> <li>▶ Chuck Feeney negotiates with Sinn Fein (republican party) on funding a Washington office to promote a political alternative to violence.</li> <li>▶ Atlantic establishes in office in Belfast.</li> </ul>
<b>Aging</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Good Friday/Belfast Agreement</li> <li>▶ A shift in Atlantic’s work supports higher-risk reforms in policing, justice, and dealing with the legacy of the past.</li> </ul>
<b>Children and Young People</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Northern Ireland Assembly suspended</li> <li>▶ Atlantic supports building research capacity in higher education.</li> </ul>

Source: Knox & Quirk, 2016

with the state; U.S. and U.K. foundations are less inclined, although this is changing (Anheier & Daly, 2006). Smyllie, et al. pose the question of whether “this activity [partnership between government and philanthropy] results in public policy development,” an area they argue is currently unexamined (2011, p. 1141). Thümler’s study of the role played by philanthropic foundations that co-operated with public actors in school-improvement partnerships in Germany and the U.S. highlighted “essentially symbolic types of action that satisfy the social appetite for reform while they spare their audiences the impositions of ‘real’ change — instances of ‘successful failure’” (2011, p. 1112). Anheier and Daly (2006, citing Prewitt, Dogan, Heydemann, & Toepler, 2006) argue that while redistribution is linked to notions of charity, social and

public-policy change is associated with philanthropy — an area that is being given greater attention in research. Overall, in a European context, research on philanthropic/government partnership working, from the paucity of published work, is therefore underdeveloped.

Atlantic Philanthropies took the strategic decision, as part of its legacy, that it would partner with government to sustain and embed key strands of the work it had supported in Northern Ireland. However successful external interventions are, philanthropic funding cannot and should not be a substitute for publicly funded services for which the state often has a legal or societal responsibility, whether as a safety net provider for the most vulnerable or as a public good. Atlantic’s programmatic strategies had

**FIGURE 2** Atlantic Philanthropies' Signature Programs

been about creating knowledge and evidence; designing, implementing, and testing models; and advocating for policy change rather than funding large-scale service delivery. As Atlantic moved to end its grantmaking by 2016, it wished to see how the learning and practices it had supported could change or influence mainstream state-run services.

Atlantic partnered with government via a wider policy framework, entitled Delivering Social Change (Northern Ireland Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2013), which was established by the Northern Ireland Executive branch to tackle poverty and social exclusion through the combined efforts of several government departments. Atlantic's plan to partner with government therefore coincided with a period when the Northern Ireland Executive feared it was proving difficult to deliver cross-cutting outcomes that straddled the individual portfolios of several departments. In that sense, the evolution of the partnership between Atlantic and the devolved government in Northern Ireland was opportunistic rather than strategic. Indeed, project leaders within Atlantic had been negotiating with individual departments before the emergence of Delivering

Social Change (DSC), which offered an overarching policy mechanism to work across government. The specific focus of Atlantic's work involved three signature programs launched by the first minister and deputy first minister in September 2014: early intervention, dementia, and shared education, each of which had formed part of Atlantic's previous grantmaking portfolio.

The total investment in these programs amounted to \$75.5 million; Atlantic Philanthropies contributed about \$28 million of that investment and the remainder came from the Office of the Minister and Deputy First Minister and from government departments with a direct interest in their functions (e.g., Education, Health, and Justice). The Early Intervention Transformation Program tries to transform mainstream public services by enabling a shift to early intervention and prevention. The Dementia Together Program contributes to the government's regional strategy, Improving Dementia Services in Northern Ireland. The Shared Education Signature Program aims to scale up the number of schools involved in sharing classes on a cross-community basis and in sharing resources and teachers as a way of breaking down sectoral boundaries



**TABLE 3** Atlantic Philanthropies' Partnership Programs With the Northern Ireland Government

Partnering With Government	Early Intervention Transformation Program	Shared Education Signature Program	Dementia Together Program
<b>Funding</b>	\$36.7 million total partnership funds	\$30 million total partnership funds	\$7.73 million total partnership funds
<b>Aims</b>	To transform mainstream services by enabling a shift to early intervention and prevention through a greater use of evidence and focus on outcomes.	To develop the extent, frequency, and continuity of meaningful shared contact between peer groups within cross-community school partnerships. Aim is to support sustained cross-community learning through shared classes, but at the same time for schools to retain their own community identity.	To make a significant contribution to the regional dementia strategy, which promotes a holistic model involving the community, family, caregivers and services in support of people with dementia.
<b>Details</b>	<p>Three work streams:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equip all parents with the skills needed to give their child the best start in life.</li> <li>• Support families when problems arise, before need for statutory involvement.</li> <li>• Address the impact of adversity on children.</li> </ul>	Funds high-quality programs that provide opportunities for shared-learning experiences that directly support the delivery of the curriculum. The program also supports the professional development of teachers and school leadership to improve the quality of sharing and collaboration among schools.	<p>Three work streams:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop human capital, including skills training for dementia workforce.</li> <li>• Provide respite, short breaks, and support to caregivers.</li> <li>• Raise awareness and provide information and support about dementia.</li> </ul>
<b>Expected Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A significant improvement in quality and quantity of prevention and early intervention services.</li> <li>• Improved staff development through integrated teams.</li> <li>• Mainstream resources redirected to make initiative sustainable.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved educational outcomes and enhanced access to the curriculum for all pupils involved in shared education.</li> <li>• Normalized peer-to-peer cross-community relationships built through regular contact within mainstream education.</li> <li>• Shared education as a component of regular inspection processes in schools and strategic plans.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The onset and progression of dementia in the Northern Ireland population is delayed.</li> <li>• People with dementia have the health and social-care services they need.</li> <li>• People with dementia live well in Northern Ireland.</li> </ul>

that reflect wider divisions in society. (See Figure 2 and Table 3.) We consider in some detail the views of stakeholders operating within and outside the philanthropy-government partnership to deliver these three Atlantic Philanthropies exit programs.

## Stakeholder Views

### *Conception, Design, and Content*

Having three signature programs operating under the same Delivering Social Change policy framework conceals some significant similarities and differences. The Shared Education Signature Program, for example, was largely seen as scaling up Atlantic's antecedent Shared Education Program. The Dementia Together Program was unambiguously about working alongside government to implement the regional strategy, *Improving Dementia Services in Northern Ireland* (Northern Ireland Department of Health, Social Services, and Public Safety, 2011). In so doing, it carved out areas of work that would add value to the implementation of the strategy: human capital development, respite care, awareness raising, and delirium. The Early Intervention Transformation Program (EITP), on the other hand, could be considered a successor program to the work Atlantic had been doing for the previous 10 years — improving outcomes for children through early intervention. Much of its work to date had been about testing, through children's NGOs, various preventive measures early in the lives of children and whether they produced better outcomes.

As one Atlantic respondent noted:

When we decided to work directly with government, each of the three strands had been doing their own thing, negotiating directly with potential government partners in terms of what we might do. Delivering Social Change then came along and that seemed to us to be a wrapper which could usefully provide a rubric for our work.

The design and content of the signature programs, however, attracted criticism from external stakeholders. Those grantees previously working on shared education detected a loss in passion and commitment to its essence as the

*Those grantees previously working on shared education detected a loss in passion and commitment to its essence as the effort became absorbed into the public-sector bureaucracy.*

effort became absorbed into the public-sector bureaucracy. In the Shared Education Program's original conception, creativity and risk-taking were encouraged and, in the spirit of learning from errors and rethinking practice, schools were not criticized for making mistakes. While probity of spending was important, accountability tended to focus on outcomes — what had been achieved in the schools. Inevitably those working outside the system on shared education felt a sense of loss when it became mainstreamed. Beyond the specifics of this program, moving from pilots to scale can result in a perceived or real diminution of core content (Ross, 2014).

The design of the dementia program was criticized for failing to take sufficient account of existing provisions and, in some cases, duplicating what was already there. The slow pace of the program was linked to what one NGO interviewee described as “the clunkiness of the system, particularly around commissioning, procurement, and recruitment processes, which [is] exacerbated when a number of public bodies are involved.” However, most criticism by former grantees was leveled at the early-intervention program, for a “lack of coherence.” Complaints took a number of forms: interventions in which Atlantic had invested significantly not appearing to any extent in the signature program; the number of pilots in a program whose purpose was perceived by former grantees as taking proof of concepts to scale; the absence of due diligence applied to partnering with government compared with what had been required of NGOs who worked with Atlantic; and the seemingly

*An example to illustrate the problems around implementation came from shared education. The Shared Education Signature Program faltered at the outset as its introduction became entangled with a trade union dispute over academic assessment. From this stuttering start the SESP has begun to gather momentum, but external interviewees expressed the view that its implementation is being carried out in the most minimalist way.*

lower priority of evidence as a consideration in program work.

Officials disagreed with these criticisms:

What we are now looking at are projects that draw from existing practice and, by improving that practice, become part of a systemic change process going forward — antenatal and postnatal pathways involving holistic support from midwives and health visitors respectively in the EITP programme is a case in point. This is changing the system.

It is also worth pointing out that while the EITP, with an investment of about \$37 million, is the largest of the three signature programs, Atlantic Philanthropies makes a contribution of approximately one-third of the overall budget (\$12 million). It is not therefore unreasonable for contributing departments to promote ideas that they deem worthy of support rather than see the EITP

as simply a vehicle to take Atlantic's prior interventions to scale. Officials also disliked some of the branded early-childhood programs supported by Atlantic that required licensing and the use of copyrighted training materials. Moreover, DSC expenditure overall is relatively small. As one civil servant pointed out:

Year-on-year, going back to 2012, we should not lose sight of the fact that DSC expenditure is less than 1 percent of public spending — it's tiny. Even if you want the "tail to wag the dog," you have a very small tail on a very big dog, so it needs to be kept in perspective.

#### *Implementation*

The key concern raised by external stakeholders on implementation was that the signature programs were being treated like "an initiative, a project, or a time-limited intervention." In other words, they did not have confidence that the implementation process to date offered reassurance on mainstreaming. In part, this may have been a feature of just how slow the process of implementation had been up to that point, for a variety of reasons. As one external stakeholder pointed out,

When we were working on shared education, it got to the point where every member of our team would walk through fire to make this work. There was a solid, unbending belief that this was the right thing to do, buoyed up by a network of teachers with the same ambition and commitment. The energy that you draw from these experiences is amazing. The reality is that it is never going to be like that when it is part of the mainstream.

An example to illustrate the problems around implementation came from shared education. The Shared Education Signature Program (SESP) faltered at the outset as its introduction became entangled with a trade union dispute over academic assessment. From this stuttering start the SESP has begun to gather momentum, but external interviewees expressed the view that its implementation is being carried out in the most minimalist way. As one NGO interviewee observed,

Shared education is about much more than shared classes. It is about changing the way in which education is delivered by pushing the boundaries to embrace joint-faith schools, federations, shared campuses, jointly appointed teachers, changes to the area planning process, and a host of other things.

A key aspect of implementing the signature programs is the interagency work associated with all three areas of work. Interviewees saw considerable merit in this idea and credited DSC as the vehicle for making cross-departmental work happen. As one official noted,

Given the unique mandatory political coalition which we have in Northern Ireland, DSC offers a vehicle in which a centre left and centre right administration can approach diverse issues that straddle their ambitions for growing the economy while, at the same time, creating a more socially just or equitable society. ... For some DSC can be an article of faith, others may see it in a more mechanistic way — for me, it has afforded a real opportunity to work horizontally.

The fact that departments made a financial commitment to the signature programs “guaranteed their presence at the partnership table, if only for accountability purposes,” an NGO interviewee said. One criticism is that their commitment will wane after activities have been commissioned, but still allows them to point to their stake in the signature programs. More fundamentally, some interviewees criticized the kind of principal-agent model (Cairney, 2012) that prevailed across interagency work, citing the relationship between the Department of Education and Education Authority as one of a number of examples: the Education Authority may act in its own interests rather than the expectations of the Department of Education, causing a principal-agent problem.

### *Mainstreaming and Sustainability*

While a number of interviewees were vocally critical of Atlantic Philanthropies’ move to partnering with government (see Table 4), few offered plausible alternatives. Rather, they provided nuanced comments on the process (more explicit intentions on Atlantic’s part of what they wanted from the partnership and greater overall

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coherence within the three signature programs). There was, in general, an acknowledgment that to mainstream provision, services piloted by Atlantic’s former grantees had to move from external interventions into recurrent spending by government departments. The issue for NGOs was how this process happened in practice.

It is unlikely that the multiple activity streams associated with the EITP can be fully resourced into the future. What internal stakeholders argue is that the working model of the EITP represents an approach to transforming children’s services through prevention and early intervention that can be sustained and embedded in the way services are delivered. This approach attempts to “change the way we do things” by posing the following questions: Where is the evidence for introducing the proposed practice change? What is the transformation — which piece of the system are you going to change? How will this change be sustained in the long term?

In shared education, there was an acceptance that prior work under Atlantic’s Shared Education Program had been hugely instrumental in securing significant policy and legislative gains that would help in the process of sustainability. There were concerns that shared education needed to be given greater priority within the education system if it was not to suffer the fate of integrated

**TABLE 4** Stakeholder Views on Partnership With Government

	Internal (Government) Stakeholders	External (NGO) Stakeholders
<b>Delivering Social Change</b>	Did not attract widespread governmental support as a framework for change.	Largely seen as unimportant in the operation of the 3 signature programs.
<b>Interagency working</b>	Departments with “skin in the game” were attentive to where their resources were going.	Government departments still find it difficult to work cross-departmentally. Government officials didn’t always value third-sector involvement in partnership arrangements.
<b>“Do no harm” to grantees</b>	Not seen as particularly relevant – the relationship between NGOs was with Atlantic.	Atlantic more concerned with legacy of partnering with government than substance/ success of signature programs.
<b>Challenge role</b>	Signature programs have a “top-down” orientation owned and managed by government departments.	Atlantic’s partnership with government has muted its challenge function. There is a need for an external voice.
<b>Mainstreaming and sustainability</b>	There is a legitimate role for departments to pilot ideas in signature programs.	Fidelity of Atlantic pilots taken to scale (Shared Education) in other areas (Dementia and EITP). Where is the change in professional practice?
<b>Role of Atlantic Philanthropies</b>	“Keeping us honest” so that resources are not absorbed into recurrent expenditures.	Transformative influence in the way government does things.

education (i.e., low growth in numbers, plateauing at under 7 percent of all school children). Shared education is not fully embedded in the system and political parties see it in very different ways — unionists (loosely Protestants) as a route to a single, state education system, and nationalists (loosely Catholics) as consistent with the principles of parental choice. There is also a concern, however, that infrastructure and buildings — shared-education campuses — will become synonymous with shared education and, in so doing, its core principles will get lost.

The Dementia Together Program was designed to complement the rollout of the regional strategy, Improving Dementia Services in Northern Ireland. The portents for sustainability are not good as pressure grows on public expenditure

and there is little sign of a follow-up strategy. As one NGO interviewee put it:

There is talk that the [dementia strategy implementation group] will be stood down, which is a worrying development, on the basis that if we don’t have another strategy, then there is no need for an implementation group. My concern is that when Atlantic’s money goes we could lose the significant gains we have made to date.

**Lessons Learned**

What have been the general lessons learned so far in partnering with government as an exit strategy, based on Atlantic Philanthropies’ experience of working outside and more recently inside the system?

- *Expectations.* External funders may have high expectations of what can be achieved with their resources. From 1991 to 2015, Atlantic awarded grants totaling more than \$600 million in Northern Ireland, or 3.6 percent of one year's public spending. This is not to minimize the level of funding involved: far from it. The key learning point for external funders is to be very targeted and selective in areas where interventions are most likely to influence change. So, although Atlantic's overall financial commitment set against the total public-sector budget appeared small, within the three targeted areas — shared education, early intervention, and dementia — the funding was significant and its track record in modeling professional practice was impressive.
- *Bureaucracies.* Public bureaucracies are slow, cumbersome, and must adhere to strict rules of accountability in spending taxpayers' money. In partnering with the public sector, external agencies have to accept that their funding becomes partly subject to the same exigencies, although foundations have the power to set and hold expectations because of the resources they commit to partnering with government. Hence, it becomes frustrating when procurement or staffing processes suck the momentum out of opportunities when, previously, philanthropic funding could be deft and fleet of foot. Somewhat perversely, however, government partners have used Atlantic's involvement as a way of bringing pressure to bear on other parts of the public sector, either to leverage pre-agreed resources or to prompt action. Such is the inertia in some parts of the bureaucracy that an external agent can, through its resources, be used to kick-start public agencies.
- *The change process.* Effecting change in the public sector is fraught with difficulties for myriad reasons. The particular experience of Atlantic Philanthropies in Northern Ireland was at the level of policy implementation. Early negotiations around partnership arrangements tended to take place at the strategic level with parent government departments in a particular area (e.g., Education, Health, Justice), but the responsibility for rolling out the programs lay with government agencies or arms-length bodies. Departments often adopted a principal-agent role and, as a result, implementation bodies did not wholly own the signature programs or fully endorse what Atlantic wanted from them. The significant lesson for external funders is to recognize the importance of managing public-policy networks, or what Osborne (2010) describes as new public governance that is "both a product of, and a response to, the increasingly plural and fragmented nature of policy implementation and service delivery" (p. 9). There should also be some recognition of the problems associated with systemwide change in the U.K. public sector, best illustrated by Pettigrew, Ferlie, and McKee (1992), who highlighted the factors most likely to create a receptive context for change.
- *Relationships with government.* Partnering with government has the potential to change relationships. Working as an external funder allowed Atlantic to support NGOs in developing alternative public-service delivery models with accompanying evidence of their effectiveness. These organizations then advocated for policy change based on proof-of-concept ideas. In some cases, this pitted NGOs against the public-sector status quo by challenging existing professional practice. In fact, Atlantic encouraged and incentivized much more than this. It supported organizations in developing advocacy campaigns that would "take on" public-sector organizations with the aim of changing public policy and/or introducing legislation. By association, Atlantic could have been perceived as a policy agitator at best, or, at worst, a thorn in the side of government. Moving to partner with government changed the nature of that relationship, although not its history. Atlantic's capacity to be indirectly critical of government through NGOs it previously

*Philanthropic money allows for experimentation, creativity, permission to get it wrong, and learning from these experiences. The public sector does not easily embrace this approach; the career trajectory of officials and ambitious politicians can be tied to the success of policies.*

funded has, of necessity, been muted. Its new role, however, offered insider status, a working relationship with senior officials, and, as a result, influence at the highest level of decision-making to advocate for mainstreaming.

- *Relationships with NGOs.* Not only do relationships with government change, but those with erstwhile NGO grantees can alter for the worse. In part this may be explained by the fact that NGOs have lost a valuable funding stream and, hence, there is an element of sour grapes. However, it is also true that NGOs, whose passion for their work helped inform the very changes now being supported in government, get lost in the routine of what officials might see as “yet another project.” NGOs have handed over their “baby,” and look with a very critical eye at the adoptive government parents. Moreover, NGOs witness what they would see as Atlantic exercising much less rigor in selecting government as a partner than they had experienced at the outset in their relationship. There will, of course, always be criticisms from NGOs that government officials do not exercise the same personal investment and level of commitment to the transferred work. When pressed for alternatives, however, NGOs accept — albeit
- reluctantly — that services cannot be sustained outside the remit of the public sector and their role must be to ensure fidelity to the good-practice models they helped to develop. For Atlantic, DSC came along at a time when it was looking for a way to partner with government, and its standards of due diligence, given the partner, may well have been lower than those expected of NGOs — a double standard, from the perspective of former grantees.
- *External voice.* This weakening as an external advocate is borne out in the role Atlantic plays in the governance of the signature programs. While Atlantic clearly deserves a seat at the oversight board by dint of its significant financial contribution, civil servants can be resentful of external “meddling” their work. Even those officials who accept Atlantic’s presence can reduce its role to one of “keeping us honest” — ensuring that philanthropic money isn’t absorbed into revenue spending in straitened financial times. Hence, having taken philanthropic money, some officials resist external funders playing anything more than a prosaic role. The lesson for Atlantic here was to make its presence felt not only by virtue of its financial contribution, but also in the expertise it brought to the table in substantive public-policy areas. The wider lesson for foundations may be that governments can seek to marginalize their influence but take their money — not with malign intent, but simply by absorbing it into the financial black hole that represents the public purse.
- *Risk aversion.* It is not surprising that with mainstreaming external interventions comes the prospect of working with public officials and elected politicians who are risk averse. Philanthropic money allows for experimentation, creativity, permission to get it wrong, and learning from these experiences. The public sector does not easily embrace this approach; the career trajectory of officials and ambitious politicians can be tied to the success of policies. Civil servants,

of course, must be guardians of public money and their actions can be restricted in the knowledge that they may at some point be called on to publicly account for how and why they took a particular course of action. That said, the spirit of “delivering social change” offered an opportunity for external funders to promote innovation and support ways of changing professional practice. In public-policy theory, these circumstances might be described as “a policy window of opportunity in which ‘policy entrepreneurs’ (Atlantic Philanthropies) frame issues and promote their solutions to policy makers or ‘solutions chasing problems’” (Kingdon, 1984, p. 174). So, notwithstanding a policy environment in which risk aversion is the norm, there are policy windows that allow external funders to influence change with policies and programs that are demonstrably effective.

- *The role of evidence.* Despite the overt commitment by the public sector to evidence-informed policymaking, in the cut and thrust of everyday life and the fluid political environment in which they operate, officials and politicians can be quite short-termist in their need for and use of evidence. This is different from the external interventions funded by Atlantic that placed an emphasis on producing a strong evidence base to substantiate the effectiveness of the work, including funding randomized controlled trials over several years. This could well be seen as a luxury that the public sector can ill-afford in terms of time and resources. External funders, therefore, offer a robust evidence base that can be persuasive in making the case for policy change, and find political advocates who can promote common interests.
- *Sustainability.* Clearly an important element for philanthropic organizations in partnering with government is to sustain the interventions, principles, and approaches they have funded. It would be relatively easy for government departments, without intent, to simply absorb

philanthropic funding and continue with the status quo. The question for external funders is how best to position themselves to ensure the optimum opportunity for long-term sustainability. One way could be to demonstrate cost savings to hard-pressed government departments. The experience from the three signature programs has varied. In one case, sustainability has been pursued through successfully advocating for a legal commitment to shared education and an education policy that rolls out that commitment. In the case of early intervention, sustainability has been promoted by changing professional practice and doing things differently — and not necessarily with additional resources — to make public services more effective. With dementia, the approach has been to assist government in the implementation of its strategy while testing models of respite care. The learning for external funders is that approaches to sustainability can be multifaceted and context specific, but that how to mainstream their interventions must always be a key element in any funding strategy.

## Conclusions

None of these limitations should be read as reasons for philanthropy not to partner with government. Rather, they are set out as reflective learning and potential issues to be aware of. Indeed, partnering with government offers real opportunities to embed models that have been developed externally and moved to the mainstream. There are senior officials in government receptive to change, open to the challenge of doing things differently, and grateful for external funding that affords them the opportunity for experimentation and innovation. Some are simply weighed down by the bureaucracy in which they operate and find it difficult to change course. Others seize the opportunity, value the evidence base of external funders, and promote change internally.

What is the reflective learning for Atlantic Philanthropies from partnering with government so far? First, the evolution and nature



of the partnership may have been different in circumstances where Atlantic had not been a spend-down foundation. A broader time frame would have been available to forge relationships with government officials who were conscious that Atlantic was in spend-down mode. This could have encouraged officials to be less receptive, adopting an “Atlantic is leaving the stage” attitude. Where Atlantic encountered dyed-in-the-wool officials, conservative in their opinions and resistant to the whole idea of external intervention, it simply circumvented and went directly to politicians. The risk in such a strategy is to unintentionally antagonize officials who ultimately are there to implement government policy. While this approach is undesirable, it has sometimes resulted in a complete volte-face by officials faced with policies that have been put in place by their political masters; a longer time frame may have prevented such an outcome. Second, Atlantic underestimated the pace of change in partnering with government and overestimated its ability to effect systemwide change. This was made more problematic in a political context where power-sharing arrangements accentuated ministerial fiefdoms and made cross-departmental cooperation problematic. Third, Atlantic had developed a strong evidence base illustrating the success of its pilot projects and advocated for direct implementation through a partnership with government. Here again, Atlantic underestimated the difficulties in taking pilots to scale within a complex public-sector system. Finally, the degree of negativity from NGOs and erstwhile grantees toward the foundation’s partnership with government came as a surprise and disappointment to Atlantic. It had anticipated that, at worst, its actions would “do no harm” and, at best, that NGOs would be more understanding of the need for mainstreaming. Atlantic was therefore unprepared for the feelings of abandonment expressed by some grantees, who may well have developed a degree of unintentional dependency simply because of the funding stream they have enjoyed. But grantees’ passion for their work and a desire to witness systemic changes were factors far more profound than the loss of Atlantic as a funding source.

While it is no road map to effecting social change in the public sector, this article has highlighted where the tensions exist and ways in which Atlantic Philanthropies is attempting to address them. It is too soon to conclude if the partnership between Atlantic and the government of Northern Ireland will lead to embedding external interventions into the mainstream of public services, but there is now good will on both sides to make this happen.

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