

Learning lessons from  
The Atlantic Philanthropies and the  
Irish Government working together

**Report of a roundtable dialogue held on 21st April 2017**

Richard Boyle  
Institute of Public Administration

The Institute of Public Administration (IPA) is Ireland's public service development agency focused exclusively on public sector development. The Institute is the home of Ireland's only dedicated public management research resource. We offer research services aimed at improving understanding of public services. We deliver evidence-based publications and consultancy services focused on major management and policy issues facing policy makers.

The Atlantic Philanthropies were founded by entrepreneur Chuck Feeney, who decided in 1982 to devote his wealth to the service of humanity. A champion of Giving While Living, Feeney has long maintained that people of wealth should use it to better the world during their lifetimes. Atlantic began making grants in Ireland in 1987. Hallmarks of the foundation's work have included stimulating a knowledge economy by revitalising higher education, transforming the design and delivery of services for children and older adults, and protecting and expanding human and civil rights for those marginalised in Irish society. The key to Atlantic's impact was establishing strong working relationships with and among government and nongovernmental organisation partners.



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*The*  
**A T L A N T I C**  
*Philanthropies*



# Foreword

On 21st April 2017, the Institute of Public Administration organised a roundtable dialogue on the subject of learning lessons from the experience of The Atlantic Philanthropies and the Irish government working together. The roundtable brought together participants from government departments and agencies and civil society organisations.

The aim of the roundtable was to draw from the experience of senior policy makers, service deliverers, and representatives from civic society organisations, of working with Atlantic. To get the views of senior managers on how philanthropy, civil society organisations, and government can best work together, and what the pitfalls and problems are.

As well as producing this stand-alone report, the findings from the roundtable will also feed into a wider study Atlantic have commissioned Dr. Richard Boyle of the Institute of Public Administration to carry out, looking at the impact of Atlantic's work on government policy and practice. The intention is to provide evidence that can be drawn on in the future by policy makers, NGOs and philanthropies wishing to work together.

We are grateful to Richard Boyle's colleagues at the IPA – Orla O'Donnell, Joanna O'Riordan and Laura Shannon – who took notes of discussions held at the tables.



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# Introduction

The Atlantic Philanthropies, established in 1982 by Irish-American businessman Chuck Feeney, is a global limited-life foundation dedicated to bringing about lasting changes in the lives of disadvantaged and vulnerable people. It has operated in Australia, Bermuda, Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland, South Africa, the United States and Vietnam, and has made grants totalling more than €7.2bn to date, with over €1.1bn invested in the Republic of Ireland.

Atlantic's grant-making in the Republic of Ireland began in 1987. In the first phase, up to 2003, the focus was on higher education. This phase culminated in a signature investment in the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTLTI), co-funded with the Irish government. The partnership with government on PRTLTI was the first time that Atlantic had worked directly with a government anywhere. Phase two of Atlantic's grant-making in Ireland began in 2003. Since then Atlantic has concentrated primarily on three areas: ageing, children and youth, and reconciliation and human rights. Since 2012, as part of its wind-down and desire to have a lasting impact, Atlantic has supported nineteen major co-investments with government in the Republic of Ireland. Atlantic's €99m investment in the areas of children and youth, dementia, and disability has leveraged €260m in public funding. These are very substantial sums of money. Atlantic's work with government is one of the most distinctive features of its funding approach.

On 21st April 2017 a half-day roundtable dialogue was held on the topic of government and philanthropy working together. The primary purpose was to provide information on the views of participants on the benefits and challenges associated with government and philanthropy partnership. This information will feed into a research study sponsored by Atlantic and carried out by Richard Boyle of the Institute of Public Administration on the influence of Atlantic's co-investments with government on government policy and practice.

Participants included senior managers from the public service (government departments, Health Service Executive, and other state agencies), senior managers from civil society organisations, and representatives from the philanthropic sector (the Appendix gives details of participants).

The roundtable consisted of two sessions. Session 1 covered partnership working between government and philanthropy. Questions addressed included:

- What are the benefits/rewards of government and philanthropy jointly funding and working on agreed programmes of work?
- What are the challenges/risks of joint working?
- What structures, processes and personal factors most support or hinder joint working?

Session 2 covered the issue of securing lasting change. Questions addressed included:

- What factors support the scaling up of time-limited joint interventions into wider policy and practice?
- What are the barriers to the scaling up of joint interventions? Can anything be done to overcome these barriers?
- Ten years from now will there be lasting benefits from Atlantic's joint funding of interventions with government? If yes, what will these be? If no, why not?

This report provides a summary of the discussion that took place at the roundtable and some of the insights emerging from the dialogue that took place.





# Session 1

## Partnership working between government and philanthropy

### **ISSUE BACKGROUND**

In recent years there has been a growing interest in how government and philanthropic organisations can work together with regard to the achievement of social goals. Philanthropy in this context is concerned with the use of private funds for the advancement of social change, whereas government is concerned with the use of public funds for a range of social and economic purposes.

Working together is not a straightforward task. Governments and philanthropies have different perspectives and emphases that need to be understood and addressed if they are to cooperate effectively.

While government and philanthropies have worked together on issues over the years, there has been a tendency for such initiatives to be episodic and project based rather than longer-term and systematic.

A distinctive feature of the approach Atlantic has taken in Ireland since the 1980s is the considered view that working in partnership with government and its agencies was seen as important if it was to achieve its objectives. This has meant working directly with government in terms of co-funding programmes of work. Atlantic has also encouraged grantees in the voluntary and community sector to work in partnership with government and its agencies to secure effective service design and delivery and inform policy.

As such, the approach adopted by Atlantic of long-term, programmatic partnership-based working with the Irish government represents a distinctive feature of government and philanthropy interaction. Lessons learned from this experience, as well as the general views of participants on philanthropy and government joint-working, were the focus of this session.

## Question 1



What are the benefits and rewards of government and philanthropy jointly funding and working together on agreed programmes of work?

### **ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION**

The amount and duration of the funding support made available by Atlantic and government was regarded as very important, both of itself and because it brought with it influence. The Atlantic funding model of leveraging government funds, and ensuring commitment to projects/initiatives by only committing their own funding based on agreed outcomes, was crucial in achieving the goals set out. The approach also provided leverage to attract further funding and commitment from government. In particular, it helped secure political buy-in at a senior level. Participants felt that the scale of funding provided by Atlantic, and the fact it was multi-annual, was also central, as only significant interventions can actually change things at national level. Joint philanthropic/government funding enabled the State to address strategic challenges that needed to be addressed.

Several government agency participants noted that having Atlantic as an external partner and funder allowed room for innovation and risk taking, and to start or expand the conversation/debate around certain issues. Innovation and risk were key words mentioned on numerous occasions by the roundtable participants. Across a number of different sectoral areas, participants felt that Atlantic funding has provided room for innovation, and has gone some way to changing how risk is viewed and managed in the public service.

Other benefits noted included: easier procurement, more robust project procedures, a greater focus on outcomes, and greater involvement of service users and communities in decisions in respect of the services they use.

Joint philanthropy/government funding was seen as a way of strengthening partnership between statutory and non-statutory organisations. Joint working gets things moving and breaks down entrenchments. On the statutory side, there was a benefit from philanthropic funding and working with other agencies helping create an impetus for change within government bodies. There was a benefit for the State in thinking someone outside could come in, look at issues and provide a new approach or drive, as otherwise the statutory side can be slow to change.

One question raised was where should the balance of power lie between the State and philanthropic organisations in joint ventures? While benefits accrue from philanthropic involvement, there was a view expressed that the State's role in terms of governance is essential. However, there was debate over where the right balance lies on a continuum between the state governing and regulating everything to more minimalist background oversight.

## INSIGHTS

- For joint philanthropic/government funding to be successful at a national level, it needs to be of sufficient scale and duration to address substantial challenges.
- Innovation in policy development and service delivery may be encouraged by the involvement of philanthropy, with risk-taking encouraged more easily than by government agencies alone.
- Greater involvement of communities and service users in the development and delivery of services for them was widely regarded as positive. Joint working of philanthropy and government was seen to facilitate and support this.
- The longer, multi-year time-frame supported by joint funding encourages and supports more sustained approaches to addressing social challenges.

## Question 2



### What are the challenges and risks associated with joint working?

#### ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Some participants suggested that Ireland has never had a good model with regard to the appropriate balance of power between the State and non-state, ‘that things just happened’. Also that ‘the State wants to control philanthropy’. However, it was acknowledged as a downside of philanthropy that ‘money never comes free’ and that philanthropy has its own agenda. There was seen to be a risk of philanthropy ‘inappropriately’ influencing government. Some were critical of the role of philanthropy, as philanthropists are not ‘answerable’ in the way public organisations are.

The flexibility of Atlantic funding does not always work well alongside the stricter annual budgets and financial regulations and restrictions of government departments and agencies.

The limited time-period of Atlantic funding was seen as both a challenge and a benefit. From the challenge perspective, it means that organisations have to plan for other funding sources if the work is to continue, and government may come under pressure to increase funding at a time of scarce resources and where there are difficult choices to be made about what priority areas receive funding.

Participants commented that the different cultures and organisational structures of philanthropy and government do not always mix well together.

There was a strong view expressed that government needs a strategic approach and response to philanthropy in Ireland. There is a need for a strategy for decision-making on funding and developing policy in the area of philanthropy and government relationships.

Some participants felt that we haven’t had public service transformation on the scale envisaged in the joint ventures. While philanthropic funding and joint working has enabled some boxes to be ticked in terms of service change, we haven’t got transformation of the whole system. Lots of public, private and voluntary organisations are all focused on local areas, as they have a good idea of needs there, but have not achieving the same scale of change at a national level.

#### INSIGHTS

- The relationship between the State and philanthropy in Ireland is an emergent one. There is not a thought out approach to appropriate roles and responsibilities, such as what the State should have control of, and where the contribution of philanthropy is beneficial.
- The challenge of finding the balance between autonomy and accountability in government/philanthropy relations needs constant attention.
- Philanthropy has its own agenda and priorities, and there is a consequent importance of transparency in this regard when jointly working with government.
- The importance of having explicit values and outcomes, and philanthropy and government matching these values and outcomes with the vision and mission of organisations being funded.

## Question 3

# What structures, processes and personal factors most hinder or support joint working?

### ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

It was suggested that central government is inherently limited in terms of partnership by the political cycle. Government needs a strategic approach and response to philanthropy in Ireland.

The contribution of jointly funded organisations such as Genio and the Centre for Effective Services was commented on favourably, the former because of its ‘ground breaking and innovative model of funding’, the latter for its research and implementation support roles. Such organisations can be seen as facilitators of wider-scale change and reform.

Participants were generally of the view that personal factors were more important than structures and processes when it came to supporting or hindering joint working. It was suggested that there has been a huge loss of institutional memory in the Irish public service (due to loss of experienced staff over the last decade), with staff turnover handled badly. This was seen as very much hindering partnership working. On a positive note, Atlantic funding has helped secure buy-in at the senior level (political and executive). However, the movement of people within government departments and agencies can hinder joint-working. Over a project life span, there can be different individuals you are liaising with in the public sector and this has impact on annual funding flows as you have to develop new relationships, as personnel are changing constantly. However, it was also accepted that this was an unavoidable reality of the relationship, but that more attention could be paid to knowledge management and succession planning.

Immediate, everyday pressures on people within the public service (the health system was noted as a particular example) make it difficult to change the status quo.

Some participants felt that the governance structures created by Atlantic can sometimes be inflexible, although the roundtable participants had mixed experiences of this. Most were of the view that the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and other formal processes introduced by Atlantic have proved valuable.

Some commented that the steering groups established by Atlantic can be too large and ineffective. It was also noted that while participation needs to be at the appropriate (senior) level, dissemination of information down to the implementation level can be ineffective. Participants further noted that members of the high-level project oversight groups need to be fully engaged and committed to the project. It can prove difficult to change the membership of steering or oversight groups once established, so it is important to ensure the right people are involved from the start. Building on this point, it was noted that it can be beneficial to focus on building relationships at the early stages, before formal governance structures are introduced.

Drawing on the experience from one successful project, one table noted the following factors as being important in supporting joint working:

- Think long-term
- Listen to and involve service users

- Work from the ground-up, involving all stakeholders
- A commitment to efficiency and effectiveness – unlocking small blockages, e.g. changing one post
- Have a champion
- Inform, communicate, being very strategic with senior management – bringing them with you, offering to make presentations etc.
- The support of the wider community of learning for example in building evidence and having academic support
- Ongoing evaluation
- In certain areas, Government should consider multi-annual budgets to provide commitment to projects and initiatives
- Government departments and agencies should have medium to long term strategic visions outlining their priorities, with which philanthropies can align their funding
- The immediate pressure on resources and personnel, particularly within the health system, needs to be balanced with a longer-term focus on systemic change
- The mobility of personnel within the public service can have a negative impact on partnership working and capacity building. Long-term strategies need to be developed in order to sustain the benefits of Atlantic funding

## INSIGHTS

- At a national level, there is a need for government to have a strategy for joint working with philanthropy.
- Staff turnover in the public sector in particular can cause challenges for joint ventures. Ways of managing this need to be found, including better knowledge management and succession planning across the public service.
- Clear governance frameworks support joint working.
- The personal factor – getting the right people involved – is most important as this can overcome structural or process problems. Identifying and supporting champions of change is vital to success.



## Session 2

### Securing lasting change

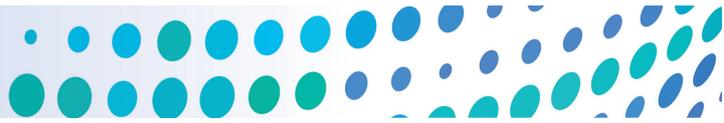
#### **ISSUE BACKGROUND**

In the private sector, the profit motive and market competition are often the drivers that encourage agents to innovate and scale up successful innovations. But for philanthropies and governments, securing lasting change from joint programmes presents a range of challenges. Experience shows that there are difficulties that arise in embedding and mainstreaming change into practice in public services,

These challenges associated with securing lasting change are compounded by the existence of a diversity of views concerning what is meant by scaling up, mainstreaming and sustainability. On the one hand are those who interpret lasting change as the continuation of the particular projects they are involved with, be it for example a particular consortium or a specific area-based programme. On the other hand, there are those who interpret lasting change as the embedding of learning and practice into the system. In this latter context, particular initiatives may be discontinued, but the lessons learned absorbed into wider practice.

In a situation of a life-limited philanthropy such as Atlantic coming to the end of its life there are specific issues around how and if changes encouraged by jointly-funded programmes with government are to be sustained, and how will government respond once Atlantic have left the scene. The focus in this session was on the general theme of how to secure lasting benefits from the joint working of government and philanthropy, in the context of life-limited philanthropic funding.

## Question 1



### What factors support the scaling-up of time-limited joint interventions into wider policy and practice?

#### ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

It was suggested that the language used is problematic in this area. Scaling up means different thing. Scaling up, for example, may mean that learnings become embedded, the project gets bigger, and/or programme expansion. The terminology of mainstreaming/scaling-up/sustainability is often used interchangeably and not well defined.

Factors noted as important in securing longer-term change included good will, ‘acceptance of the issue’, a reasonably long time-frame to give opportunities to revise and resource interventions, and senior management involvement. Some contributors suggested that while good joint interventions can impact on wider policy and practice, it should be borne in mind that a sound policy framework can sometimes be necessary to ensure scalability.

The demonstration of impact and the use of evidence was noted as a supporting factor in securing lasting change, and something that Atlantic in particular have given prominence to in their joint initiatives with government. There was a common view amongst participants that this emphasis on evidence wouldn’t have happened to the same extent without joint funding and that it makes it easier to lobby for the continuation/scaling-up of an intervention, if the evidence demonstrates that it is effective. Participants noted Atlantic intervention has greatly increased the evidence of what works in Ireland. This supplements international evidence to support the scaling-up of interventions that have demonstrated impact.

While the interventions are time-limited, long-term thinking is always a key aspect of joint Atlantic/government grants which supports scaling-up.

Senior level buy in or ‘champions’ being identified and involved from the beginning supports the sustainability of joint interventions. Roundtable participants spoke highly about the senior level buy-in which is a feature of all Atlantic interventions. Atlantic have identified champions in many different fields, and have developed networks and relationships around these key players in order to build and maintain partnership working. While capacity building across the entire system is crucial, there needs to be a mandate for change and this needs to come from the top down.

One participant indicated that in the case of a project they were involved in, from day one, the ending of the grant was built into the planning by both sides (by the funder and the recipient). This avoids confusion about scale and what needs to happen in terms of sustainability. Once you discuss these things at the outset, then you can decide if it is desirable or feasible to scale up.

#### INSIGHTS

- Be clear about the objectives of scaling up at the start of the process: for example, is it about scaling the lessons learned, the actual projects supported, or both.

- Sometimes it's necessary to have a policy framework in place before an initiative can be mainstreamed.
- Top level champions, good will, and involvement are necessary ingredients for securing lasting change.
- The creation and development of an evidence base is an important element in supporting sustainability of joint initiatives, where the evidence shows the achievement of positive outcomes.

## Question 2



### What are the barriers to the scaling-up of joint interventions and what can be done to overcome them?

#### ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

A typical comment on this theme was that there is lots of goodwill towards scaling up of successful projects, but systems are always in flux and personnel changing. To a large extent many people and organisations (both public and civil society) were seen as still operating in silos, with a consequent need for greater shared learning across silos. There tends to be a focus on services rather than systems. Linked to this is a reluctance to act at a national level, and instead rely on pilot initiatives, despite the fact that Ireland is a small country.

The fragmented civil society landscape was noted as a potential barrier. In terms of securing lasting change, the question has to be asked whether this fragmentation of effort and resources is likely to be a hindrance.

Many of the Atlantic/government joint interventions are focused on the long-term issues associated with caring for patients. Participants commented that the focus on prevention and early intervention would not have been accomplished without Atlantic's intervention. However, the day-to-day pressure on our public services, particularly health services, make it difficult to balance the need to care for the immediate needs of patients with a long-term vision. Some also noted that they feel there has been too much focus on services, and not on systemic change.

In contrast to Atlantic's long-term approach, more general philanthropist buy-in was raised as a possible barrier in some cases. For example, a philanthropic funder is moving on and a new funder arrives, but, if a need doesn't float their boat, they won't fund it. Philanthropic funding is provided on the basis that if they believe in a cause they fund it. Some philanthropies may be impatient for change and unwilling to work with government for the long haul.

Lack of mandate for change and appetite for risk was cited as an inhibiting factor, particularly in the public service.

Cross-sectoral funding can be difficult to negotiate, as is public organisations committing to multi-annual funding.

The impact of the financial crisis in Ireland was seen as inhibiting scaling-up of lessons learned from joint interventions. The crisis was seen by some participants as creating a retrenchment mentality in government and drive back to core areas of service delivery, marginalising the role of civil society organisations.

#### INSIGHTS

- There needs to be awareness on the part of philanthropy that joint working with government, if it is to be successful, requires a long-term commitment. There are no quick fixes.
- Fragmentation of resources – of civil society organisations and of government agencies – can inhibit joint working and learning and the securing of lasting change.
- Develop the architecture for whole of government approaches and provide more opportunities for joined-up work of government.

## Question 3

Ten years from now, will there be lasting benefits from Atlantic's joint funding of interventions with government?

### ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Several participants noted that Atlantic and government have already made a number of joint investments which have had a lasting effect after the funding has finished, most notably the Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions (PRTL). Some of these initiatives were provided with seed funding and have become sustainable in their own right.

There was a general view that a number of positive benefits will arise over the longer-term. These include better outcomes for citizens and service users; more innovation; better systems; a better evidence base; and more focus on policy areas such as prevention and early intervention. In terms of lasting benefits, across programme areas, collaboration was seen as in some cases transforming ways of working, and developing sustainable partnerships and relationships.

Participants also noted the creation of an 'Atlantic network' – champions of change in both the public sector and civil society who are committed to the principles and practices advocated in the jointly funded initiatives. While these people may move around within/across organisations, participants noted that a lot of the same people stay involved in different capacities. They represent a significant resource to facilitate support for and delivery of reform.

Some participants felt that the idea of a 'legacy' from joint government/philanthropy initiatives was too 'black and white'. They suggested that maybe instead, it should be looked on that we are on a 'journey'.

### INSIGHTS

- Philanthropy and government joint funding of interventions can lead to long-term lasting change.
- The creation of a 'network' of champions of change crossing both the public sector and civil society is an important product of joint initiatives.

# Appendix

## List of roundtable participants

| Name              | Organisation  |
|-------------------|---|
| Mr Tom Boland     | Benefacts   |
| Donal de Buitleir | Publicpolicy.ie                                     |
| Katie Burke       | Centre for Effective Services                       |
| Francis Chance    | Katharine Howard Foundation                         |
| Madeleine Clarke  | Genio   |
| Ned Costello      | Irish Universities Association                      |
| Grainne Cullen    | Department of Education and Skills                  |
| Claire Collins    | Department of Health                                |
| Nuala Doherty     | Centre for Effective Services                       |
| Deirdre Garvey    | The Wheel   |
| Rhona Gaynor      | Department of Health                                |
| Dr Aisling Gillen | Tusla Child and Family Agency                       |
| Jackie Harrison   | The Community Foundation for Ireland                |
| Dr John Healy     | Genio   |
| Eilis Hession     | Health Service Executive                            |
| Mary Higgins      | Caranua   |
| Dr Phil Jennings  | Health Service Executive                            |
| Dr Fiona Keogh    | NUI Galway  |
| Dr Teresa Maguire | Department of Health                                |
| Mary Manning      | Health Service Executive                            |
| Fred McBride      | Tusla Child and Family Agency                       |
| Éilis Murray      | Philanthropy Ireland                                |
| Dr Rory O'Donnell | National Economic and Social Council                |
| Tina Roche        | The Community Foundation for Ireland                |
| Dr. Aileen Shaw   | UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUI Galway |
| Dr. Noelle Spring | Katharine Howard Foundation                         |
| Mervyn Taylor     | Sage - Support & Advocacy Service                   |
| Jim Walsh         | Department of Social Protection                     |

| Name              | Organisation                       |
|-------------------|------------------------------------|
| Dr Richard Boyle  | Institute of Public Administration |
| Orla O'Donnell    | Institute of Public Administration |
| Joanne O'Riordan  | Institute of Public Administration |
| Marian O'Sullivan | Institute of Public Administration |
| Laura Shannon     | Institute of Public Administration |
| Mary Sutton       | The Atlantic Philanthropies        |



