

PUBLIC MANAGEMENT POLICY INSIGHT BRIEF

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PHILANTHROPY AND GOVERNMENT WORKING TOGETHER LESSONS LEARNED FROM IRELAND

A study by the Institute of Public Administration draws lessons from partnership working between The Atlantic Philanthropies (Atlantic), government and civil society organisations in Ireland. The study shows that there have been significant benefits arising from the work of Atlantic, in partnership with the Irish government. This is not to say that there have not been challenges along the way, or that all interventions have been equally successful. But progress has been made, and lessons learned, from both the successes and the failures.

Lessons for philanthropies

- Work at both the policy and project levels, aiming to influence both policies and practice.
- Relationship building between philanthropy and government takes time, and philanthropies should be prepared to invest in the relationship over many years.
- Individuals matter, especially those in senior management positions in government. They can make the difference between success and failure. Identifying and working with those in government committed to change that accorded with the goals of Atlantic was one of the things done well.
- Change in government is slow. This slow pace of change needs to be factored in by philanthropy in any joint venture with government.
- Accept that there will be staff turnover in government organisations, and that philanthropy will have to plan for and develop new working relationships with people coming in who may have little or no previous knowledge of the area.
- Atlantic would not have had the influence it has with government unless the scale and timescale of investment was substantial. Also, Atlantic took its time deciding about investment, and engaged with government first on the issue, to gauge whether or not they would be willing to partner.
- Phased payment of grants, linked to narrative progress reports and financial reports showing the schedule of expenditure, act as a learning and accountability mechanism both for the philanthropy and for government. It provides an opportunity for structured dialogue about any delays, issues arising and so on.
- Co-funding of investments by government is important. This encourages government to realise they have to seriously engage, and not just accept money that can be used for agreed purposes. But it also means that philanthropies will have to accept working alongside accountability rules that apply to public expenditure.
- Money alone is not enough. Engagement with government is needed if philanthropies want to move beyond establishing isolated pockets of good practice. Even with government engagement, moving beyond pilot sites, where used, can be challenging.

- Having a consistent focus on outcomes and evidence is vital. Risk aversion is a common trait of public servants, linked to their accountability norms. This can create tensions when philanthropies are looking to innovate. Using evidence to show that interventions are effective is vital in winning support for change.
- Collaborations and networks play a pivotal role in embedding change, in terms of increasing buy-in from stakeholders and sharing of resources, knowledge and experience. As is collaboration with other funders. Managing relationships across public policy networks is central to effective implementation, where responsibility does not lie solely with one body.
- Adopting a firm but flexible approach. Firm with regard to securing the commitment of government and commitment to agreed outcomes. Flexible with regard to addressing issues that arise and willingness to adapt as necessary within agreed boundaries.

Lessons for government

- Think strategically about in what areas it is appropriate to work with philanthropy. Identify priority issues where innovative thinking could be of most assistance. Spend time understanding the opportunities that working with philanthropy can bring, but also the challenges.
- The public sector can be driven by response to crises. Working with philanthropies to develop theories of change and examine the evidence base before committing investments can act as a counter to short-termism, and support longer-term thinking on policy.
- Looking at philanthropies as solely a source of cash to support existing programmes, and trying to limit their voice during implementation, will lead to a poor working relationship. Commit time to developing a good working relationship.
- Think through the challenges of implementation. Work with the philanthropy to ensure they understand the pressures and restrictions on the use of public money.
- Work at developing a willingness to operate across organisational boundaries and collaborate with civil society organisations. Facilitate collaborative learning networks that can build and support capacity.
- Support evidence generation and evaluation activities. These can help fill knowledge gaps and support change where the evidence is positive in support of the desired direction of change.
- Plan ahead for embedding change. Particularly where pilot projects or area-based initiatives are involved, clarify expectations and identify what mainstreaming might look like as early as possible.

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Further details on the lessons learned and other aspects of government, philanthropy and civil society organisations working together can be found in R. Boyle and L. Shannon (2018), *Better Together? Philanthropy and Government: Lessons from The Atlantic Philanthropies and Irish Government Partnership-based Co-Investments*, Dublin: Institute of Public Administration. Available to download from <https://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/research-reports/better-together-philanthropy-and-government> or <https://www.ipa.ie/fileupload/ResearchPapers/Better Together Report.pdf>