

Is collaborating in EPIM worthwhile?

Juliet Prager

Collaboration is tough, tricky and time-consuming. It involves, among other things, defining common priorities and expectations among organizations whose outlook and style of work may be very different. But it can definitely be worthwhile. This is what I've learned both as an active member of the European Programme for Integration and Migration (EPIM) and from research I conducted on foundation collaboration during sabbatical leave last summer. In this article, I use the EPIM experience to illustrate what I have learned about some of the challenges and benefits of collaboration.



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Why collaborate?

There are many reasons foundations decide to collaborate, but for the purposes of this article I'm going to group them into two broad areas. First, collaboration can help you make your existing work more efficient and effective. It can help extend contacts, improve access and support advocacy. Second, it can provide opportunities for learning, helping foundations explore new fields of interest or discover new ways of doing things.

Whatever the reason, it is important for all the partners to know why they are working together. As one person in my research put it: 'Be absolutely clear about what you want to achieve and agree this beforehand.'

When the EPIM members discussed this we realized that each foundation had different reasons for joining. Françoise Pissart of the King Baudouin Foundation

explained that 'we believe that coalition-building through EPIM will build neutrality and create a strategic focus, leading to increased impact'. Some foundations, like the Robert Bosch Stiftung, see EPIM as a way to engage at European level, while for the Oak Foundation EPIM offers a good way of engaging with new organizations.

Collaboration for efficiency and effectiveness

Increasingly, foundations are attempting to use their resources more efficiently, and to greater effect. When I asked what factors are important in deciding whether to join partnerships, at least 90 per cent of survey respondents gave reasons that fall into this area: securing better contacts or different skills, increasing the amount of funding available or being more strategic. As a large pooled fund, EPIM enables foundations to work together on a major funding programme; it also avoids duplication, by providing a single channel to support and develop NGOs.

While collaborations can bring savings, they can also be resource-hungry. They take time to set up, something which was stressed over and over by the people who responded to my survey. This is also my experience of EPIM, and at times it has been difficult to devote enough time to it. EPIM dealt with this by appointing a full-time programme manager, who has taken on an increasing number of tasks, relieving foundation members of the administrative burden. The grantees, in turn, value having one point of contact with several donors.

Collaboration for learning

As many as 86 per cent of survey respondents saw collaboration as an opportunity to learn. For Brian Kearney-Grieve of Atlantic Philanthropies, EPIM is a way of 'seeing different perspectives, and being challenged by others who share a common objective'. Each partner has been introduced to new organizations, new ideas and new thinking. We have commissioned European policy briefings, to inform ourselves as well as grantees. Designing a new grants programme, we shared ideas on the grant application form, how to make grants decisions, and what reporting to expect of grantees. We created a hybrid programme, and have learned from seeing it operate.

Collaboration for advocacy

As a report from TPI puts it, 'donor collaboratives can have clout, gaining the attention of an entire community, including service providers, policymakers and community leaders'.¹

EUROPEAN PROGRAMME FOR INTEGRATION AND MIGRATION (EPIM)

EPIM was initiated in 2005 by a group of foundations from different European countries. It now has ten foundation members. It aims to strengthen the role played by NGOs active on migration and integration issues in advocating for a European agenda that benefits migrants and receiving communities.

Practically, EPIM:

- ▶ offers grants to support NGOs working on key issues;
- ▶ strengthens NGOs' and foundations' capacity through 'more than money' activities: workshops, newsletters, policy briefings;
- ▶ supports NGOs' and foundations' advocacy and policy work.

The steering committee, on which each foundation is represented, meets twice a year. Members also keep in touch by email and teleconferencing.

From the start, EPIM's partner foundations were keen to place advocacy at the heart of the project, though in practice it was not easy to shape an advocacy strategy because each foundation had different assumptions about foundations' advocacy role. Eventually, with the help of communications experts, we developed a clear strategy that all partners were comfortable with. From this process we learned that it is not always possible, or even desirable, to anticipate or agree all the elements of a communication and advocacy strategy early on. As EPIM's programme evaluation points out: 'If the funding programme is to have an advocacy strategy separate but complementary to that of the grantees, it needs to allow for differing levels of engagement by foundations but ensure a consistent message is agreed and delivered.'

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Are we succeeding?

Having agreed the purpose of the collaboration, the EPIM group set itself objectives for the short, medium and long term, and designed activities and outputs to match. External evaluators attend all our meetings, and listen to grantees, policymakers and foundations. Their regular reports help us reflect on what we are doing and, crucially, to make adjustments as we go along. They have helped us understand which parts of the grant application process worked well and which did not – so our second grants round was simpler (and cheaper to operate). They told us that grantees want practical training rather than motivational speakers, so we are changing the workshops. They helped us see that in some cases grantees have more access to policymakers than we do, so we have modified our expectations of the advocacy work.

Overall, though, the evaluators tell us that EPIM demonstrates the benefits of collaborative funding. It can expand the amount of funding available for a particular issue. It can bring new foundations into a field that is poorly served by private philanthropy. It is a way for foundations to support projects across national or other boundaries when they would normally fund only in a particular region. It can help them reach grantees they would not normally encounter.

Bringing the benefits home

However, if collaboration is intended to enhance foundations' existing programmes, we may not be making the most of it. An intriguing finding from my research was that learning is often restricted to

individual participants: new ideas are rarely adopted by their foundation, and collaborative projects are often seen as an add-on to the foundation's main work programmes.

I believe this poses a challenge for chief executives, who need to ensure collaborative work is both properly supported and integrated into the foundation's core work programmes. Without this, they may find trustees and staff questioning whether these 'additional' projects are valuable or relevant.

There are practical ways to increase foundation buy-in. For example, the Gulbenkian Foundation was disappointed that none of its own grantees received an EPIM grant. Creatively, it offered to host one of the grantee workshops to which Portuguese NGOs were invited, to meet and learn from EPIM grantees. This was warmly welcomed and the approach has been adopted for workshops in other countries.

Spreading the word

As Robert Hughes has observed, '... with few exceptions, published reports about collaborations tend to focus on the benefits and neglect the downsides'.² EPIM is bucking this trend by publishing the findings of our external evaluators, and our own reflections on what we are learning. As an example, the most recent report includes the following:

'A key challenge for foundation staff within a regranting programme is the large amount of thematic and management information it generates for participating foundations. Different foundations . . . look for different types of information and levels of detail. How to provide this in an efficient manner is a key challenge to both grantees and the programme secretariat.'

Conclusion

Collaboration is time-consuming, can be expensive and difficult, and does not work for everyone. In fact, there are so many reasons not to work with others that it is surprising any of us even contemplate it. But when it is done well, collaboration can be extremely worthwhile. As for EPIM, we are now hard at work planning a third phase: a clear indication that the foundations involved are convinced of its benefits, to foundations, to our grantees, and to our goal of improving the lives of migrants and settled communities in Europe. @

¹ Donor Collaboration: Power in numbers (2010) The Philanthropic Initiative <http://tinyurl.com/alliance57>

² R Hughes (2005) *Philanthropies Working Together: Myths and realities*, Foundation Center <http://foundationcenter.org/gainknowledge/practicematters>