

## Solutions Sounding Board: Action learning at Inspiring Impact November 2018 network event

### Summary of the discussion and learning

#### The question

My organisation distributes funding to various third sector organisations. These organisations send their evaluation reports to me, and then I report back to the source funder about the impact these organisations are making. My challenge is that the level of detail and quality of the evaluation reports I receive varies. What can I do to support these organisations with their reporting so that everyone can better understand the impact of their work?

#### What we discussed

- How honest or not organisations are (and feel able to be) when telling their funder about how much they have achieved. Is impact information missing from reports because planned outcomes haven't been achieved (or not fully)? There was concern raised that if organisation talk about problems encountered then they also need to have a solution (a positive spin?), or it will seem like they are reporting failure.
- Whether the length of funding has an impact on how much organisations can learn from their work, and whether short term funding helps or stifles innovation?
- If reports are the method for gathering evidence about impact, how might organisations be helped/encouraged to report better? And how could other methods be used to gather impact information?

#### Did we answer the question?

Partially- it's complex! It raised further issues.

- Often evaluation is project-specific rather than organisation-wide which makes drawing larger conclusions difficult (and how well evaluation is done within organisations/projects varies too).
- There was a general feeling that within the sector there is a tendency to be 'too modest' about our successes and the difference we make.

#### What we learned: messages from funded organisations to funders

1. **Honesty:** This is important but can be a challenge. Our discussion confirmed that yes, funders do want their grantholders to be honest about what didn't work as well as planned, however grantholders often feel that if they report that they

are under pressure to provide an alternative solution. Sometimes there is no solution and the concern is that **the lack of a solution** could be interpreted by funders as failure, lack of learning or initiative.

2. **Connecting:** Funders could facilitate meet ups for grantholders working towards similar outcomes. The group talked about experiences of where this has been helpful mid-grant as a way of improving shared understanding about what their work is trying to achieve. Creating an environment that focused on learning allowed some people to feel more at ease talking about any challenges they encountered. However, it was also noted that organisations can feel uncomfortable sharing challenges, or their resources, if they feel they are in competition with each other.

3. **Different funders have different priorities:** The discussion reflected the ongoing challenge for organisations who have more than one funder – how to report accurately and effectively when different funders have different requirements, priorities and understandings of 'impact'? How much do funders want to know about both activities delivered as well as impact, and is this changing?

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