EMBEDDING PUBLIC POLICY CHANGE
The role of philanthropy and civil society

When philanthropies and civil society organisations work with government, it is often on relatively small scale development projects, with a view to embedding and mainstreaming change if they are a success.

There are a diversity of views concerning what is meant by embedding change. On the one hand there are those who interpret it as the continuation of the particular projects they are involved with, for example a specific area-based programme. On the other hand, there are those who interpret it 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.

Embedding policy change requires the securing of a critical mass of support within organisations for the direction of change.

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A study by the Institute of Public Administration drew lessons on embedding and mainstreaming change from work being undertaken between The Atlantic Philanthropies (Atlantic), government and civil society organisations in Ireland.

Where there are pilot sites modelling the desired change, one significant lesson for mainstreaming is to be aware of the characteristics of the pilot site(s). It is of limited use locating pilot(s) in locations or amongst demographic groups that may not typically match the biggest needs when mainstreaming occurs. Nor can the resourcing of pilots be out of line with resources that may be available should mainstreaming be desired.

KEY POINTS

- Involve joint working between government and civil society organisations from the beginning.
- Identify, support and work with champions of change in the system.
- Identify and address the resistors to change.
- Make sure that the characteristics of pilot sites (if used) are comparable to the areas where mainstreaming will be applied.
- Beware the dangers of creating small islands of excellence in a sea of muddling through.
- Develop specific embedding initiatives, such as the establishment of a mainstreaming group.

Another notable lesson is the need to embed change into existing structures and processes if it is to be sustainable. Otherwise there are dangers of creating small islands of excellence in a sea of muddling through.

Some interviewees stressed the importance of having government (both political and official levels) involved from the beginning, and that it is unlikely to get support for mainstreaming an initiative 'down the road'. Government partners need to be involved from the design stage as it gets progressively more difficult to get acceptance, even of good ideas, if government have not had an involvement.

Atlantic has been active in consciously working with leaders in the public sector to secure commitment to achieving their goals. These people are champions in the system for the kind of change being supported by Atlantic, working to embed change in the system. These are people in senior positions with the authority to promote mainstreaming of service changes.

There is also a need to identify and address vested interests or the main resistors to change who may not wish to implement policy for a variety of reasons. Atlantic has strongly encouraged the development and use of implementation science amongst public servants as one way of addressing resistance to change and managing the change process.

Specific mainstreaming initiatives may also be helpful. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs has established a mainstreaming group to examine how learning from the ABC programme (an area based response to childhood poverty) and other related initiatives can be mainstreamed.