Going Global: Tips for the International Grants Professional
By David Lindeman, CFRE, GPC

Last week’s celebration of the first International Grant Professionals Week highlighted how our profession truly spans the globe. This milestone caused me to reflect on my own experiences in the past year in working with international funders and collaborators on grant projects. Indeed, the opportunity to work with donor agencies in countries and regions ranging from Kenya to Pakistan to Israel to the Caribbean was exciting. It also revealed unique opportunities and challenges for grant professionals, especially those who may have worked primarily with U.S.-based funders.

What makes working with international funders the same as, or different from, working with U.S.-based funders?

Basically, many of the same best practices for grantseeking and fundraising that apply to U.S.-based funders also apply to working with international funders. However, each country-specific context is different, with its own distinct nuances that require special attention from the grant professional. By “international funder,” I refer to public and private organizations headquartered outside the U.S. or with a distinct local presence in countries outside the U.S. These include government-run agencies, foundations, and in many cases, local offices of U.S. or international agencies (such as the United Nations, World Bank, or USAID).

Some recent lessons I’ve learned from working with international funders include:

1) Focus on the local context. Each country is different and requires a customized approach. The specific public health needs and context in Kenya, for example, are very different even from neighboring countries. I encourage grant professionals to think of a UN or USAID office in a given country as its own entity, distinct from the organization’s offices in other countries. The country office is focused specifically on local needs, frequently issues its own RFPs, often manages its own grants and contracts, and is usually mostly staffed by citizens of the country and local experts.

2) Relationships, relationships, relationships! As with any other area of grantseeking, relationship-building is critical. One must get to know and build trust with funders in each country in a very personalized manner. I have found that most countries outside the U.S. have a strong desire for in-person interactions or at least visual meetings. In fact, I have many more Skype video calls with international funding partners than with U.S.-based funders. In some countries, it is truly a "small world" where word travels fast, so it’s important to pay special attention to building an open, communicative, responsive, and respectful relationship.

3) Do your research – and even more. Similar to U.S. funders, international funders are likely to give to the same types of causes and organizations that they have funded in the past. Be sure to research the funder thoroughly through online directories, media citations, and country-specific resources. I’ve found that U.S. embassies in each country can help identify U.S. organizations working in-country and their funders. Also, each U.S. embassy and USAID mission (i.e., the country or regional office) has its own website, which can provide useful information. Many countries also have an American Chamber of
Commerce ("AmCham") or a country-specific business association that usually has a U.S. office (e.g., the U.S.-Saudi Business Council). These associations often include nonprofit organizations—not just companies and corporations. Also, I’ve found it very useful to “work” both sides of the ocean. For example, it’s helpful to talk with a Washington-based World Bank representative, in addition to a primary World Bank contact that is based in Africa.

4) **Ensure sound legal and financial processes for grant administration.** It’s very important to ensure from the start that grant administration procedures are or will be in place. Entities affiliated with a multinational or U.S. organization—such as the UN, World Bank, or USAID—will have very detailed grant and contract administration procedures. However, a new international foundation may not have as well-defined mechanisms. Find out how grants are managed and verify that there is a working mechanism to transfer funds. Also, make sure to find out what currency the grant funds will be issued in, procedures for currency exchange, and any tax implications. The local U.S. embassy can be helpful in clarifying these country-specific legal and financial regulations.

5) **Be cognizant of cultural and linguistic distinctions.** Building a relationship with an international funder takes time and requires an understanding of cultural and linguistic similarities and differences. Take careful note of country holidays, religious observations, and time zone differences (I have become familiar with the occasional 3 am conference call!). Avoid idiomatic expressions or phrases that may be harder for non-native English speakers to comprehend, and clarify words and phrases to reduce chances for misunderstanding.

6) **Finally, be flexible!** Developing a relationship with—and securing a grant from—an international funder may take a long time and take unexpected turns. As sometimes happens with U.S. funders, I’ve found that some international contacts may go quiet for a while or have delays in issuing RFPs. Further, sometimes broader geopolitical events (such as economic downturns or even revolutions!) may take over. In the end, however, the resulting relationship is almost always rewarding on both personal and professional levels.

With flexibility and perseverance, grant professionals have wonderful opportunities to engage in international work. Indeed, the celebration of International Grant Professionals Week reminds us of the “international” in our work and how we, as grant professionals, can work with funders around the world to address shared areas of interest and advance philanthropy.

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