

Some practical responsibilities for independent grant-makers

- Be open about your objectives, and seek to renew them as society changes and in the light of experience.
- Be open about programmes, and where your objectives allow, open to possibilities for new programmes.
- Be transparent about grant-making processes and open to new ideas and applicants.
- Be transparent about finances, including assets, investment, income, expenditure, and grants made.
- Be efficient in management.
- Be sensitive to the wishes and opinions of donors, beneficiaries, communities, and others who have a legitimate claim to influence, but do not accept avoidable constraints on your independence.
- Assess the risks of new ventures responsibly, alongside the risks of failing to engage with anything new.
- Sponsor things which other funders find difficult because they have constraints that foundations do not have.
- Sponsor things which are likely to make a difference to individuals' lives, to communities, and to society as a whole, by tackling deep-seated problems, developing new services, and seeking solutions which others can pick up.
- Look to the long-term and don't be concerned about short-term fashion and pressures.
- Be transparent about results, proud of successes and honest about apparent failures.
- Use lessons from experience to influence future objectives, programmes, and development.

Notes

In 2002, accountability of grant-making foundations was a fashionable buzzword in the USA, foundation 'community', and I was commissioned by the International Network on Strategic Philanthropy (a mostly American network, though funded by Germany's Bertelsmann Foundation) to do a literature search and develop some general principles.

Unfortunately the literature was not uniformly in favour of accountability; indeed some (mostly American) foundations took great pride in being accountable to no-one. While not agreeing with such arrogance, I was concerned that a drive for short-term accountability was not compatible with long-term independence, another essential hallmark of foundations. Sadly, this was not what the people who had commissioned me wanted to hear, but I feared they were being too naïve.

But I did conclude that foundations had responsibilities. The above is my formulation of them. I am sorry that it was simply 'lost'. I've slightly improved the wording, but I still think it works well enough to be worth publishing here.

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