

## Member Spotlight

With grantees located around the globe ranging from Vietnam to Bermuda and Ireland to California, The Atlantic Philanthropies are an authority on the subject of evaluating, connecting and supporting a diverse set of organizations. In this month's Member Spotlight, we speak with **John A. Healy**, director of impact assessment and global learning at The Atlantic Philanthropies.

### **GEO: The Atlantic Philanthropies places an emphasis on systematic change and addressing root causes of injustice. How does this impact the way that you evaluate your grantees and cultivate effectiveness?**

We focus our work in strategic learning and evaluation on questions which are central to the work of the activists we fund. This approach enables the evaluations to inform both the grantees' work and our strategy. Atlantic's goal is to combine a very practical approach to evaluation with a desire to help our grantees produce credible findings that also benefit the fields where we work. Whether supporting randomized control trials or rigorous process case studies of advocacy campaigns, there is a need to understand the key questions each grantee would like answered and to explore how evaluation can strengthen its knowledge base and/or operations.

Sometimes in the social justice philanthropy space, effectiveness and social activism are juxtaposed. Some activists are fundamentally opposed to certain evaluation methods and some funders operate with an assumption that nonprofits require direction and control to become more effective. In reality, effectiveness and activism need to go hand in hand. Funders can help by tailoring evaluations to the needs of grantees and engaging with them in ways that encourage strategic learning.

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The organizations we support in the area of immigration reform in the United States, for example, are anxious to understand in real-time the impact that their advocacy efforts are having in terms of influencing key stakeholders. In Ireland, we are funding rigorous impact evaluations of early childhood programs with the intention of improving service provision. We use different methods in each situation, and the issues and communities drive our evaluation approach. Evaluations are also particularly useful at stimulating debates about the strategies among groups of grantees working together on common causes or issues.

### **The Atlantic Philanthropies plan to spend down their entire endowment, ending active grantmaking in 2016 and closing their doors by 2020. How does this effect your approach to building leaders and scaling successful practices among your grantees?**

The spend-down increasingly informs how we think about our funding strategies and makes us look harder at what we want to achieve over our remaining five years of grantmaking. Spending-down enables us to target far more resources to support organizations and causes now, than we could if we were a perpetual foundation. With our end in sight, we are being even more disciplined in our current strategic planning to ensure that we focus on the highest and best uses of our remaining resources to achieve the greatest impact. We won't get a second chance! One contribution that Atlantic can make to the philanthropic sector is to share the lessons about our successes and failures and to document the spend-down process in an honest and open way. We have commissioned Duke University to carry out this research and the first installment of this work is [on our website](#).

Increasingly we are putting more effort into sharing the lessons of our grantees' work and, in particular, encouraging grantees that adopt similar social change strategies to engage in dialogue across our programme and geographic boundaries. For

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example, we have documented the lessons from our grantees work in Public Interest Litigation in South Africa in a study which has proven very popular on our website, and recently we held an international gathering of activists to share experiences of using the law to advance social change goals. We are fortunate to have an excellent cadre of leaders in the organizations which we support, and one of the main ways to support them is to facilitate information exchange and peer learning events.

We also work with the organizations we support to tailor specific supports to help their leaders build their organizations' capacity. Similar to our evaluation approach, there is not one single way that a foundation needs to work with grantee leaders. These capacity building supports — ranging from commissioning expert advice on fundraising to supporting consultancy on organizational change — vary depending on the circumstances. We identify these needed supports from dialogue with grantees rather than from a foundation “archetype” system of what grantees need to be effective.