HOW TO BUILD EQUITABLE, INCLUSIVE ALLIANCES

By Sonya Ruparel

The importance of building wider alliances around a common cause, ensuring these reflect the full diversity of our society and are equitable and inclusive, has been underlined by discussions in our Sharing and Building Power cell. Sonya Ruperal shares insights from her work on how to do this at Turn2Us and elsewhere.

Turn2us, where I now work, is in its 125th year, having been created by a radical Victorian Philanthropist, Elizabeth Finn, as a grant-making organisation for 'distressed gentlefolk'. Radical philanthropy in 2022 looks very different, and grant-making to those whose rights have been denied should be very different to how it looked 125 years ago. Our organisations carry society within them, so we must take individual journeys to find better ways of working to improve our societies and organisations, sharing these with others as we do in a Better Way and learning from each other. Here are some insights in relation to sharing power and collaboration that I have been learning on my journey about how to build equitable and inclusive alliances around a common cause. Three principles shine through.

1. The 'What' mustn't trump the 'How'

In much of the work that I have done in collaboration, there is often a tension between the 'what' and the 'how' of what we do. If we only focus on what we are trying to achieve, we will lose people along the way and if we only focus on the how (for example, shifting power) organisations and people will quickly drift away as it will start to feel as though nothing is being achieved. There does need to be a joint purpose that everyone involved in the collaboration is trying to achieve, even it feels too large and complex to tackle. Let me give you an example…

A group of grant makers (Turn2us, Buttle and Smallwood Trust) are collaborating to develop a programme to bring our collective grant-making expertise to tackle issues of gendered poverty. It took us over a year to develop this purpose together, in conversation with different members of our teams, and boards, with different approaches, and conversation diversions into 'how' we work together. This hasn't been an easy journey, and we started off with four organisations – along the way, one organisation's Board realised, as time went on, that they weren't yet ready to shift their ways of working and finance a project with unclear outcomes. It's a leap of faith in the process to not have a clear intended outcome from day one of the design of a programme and to allow it to be designed genuinely in co-production. We intend to continue to define the purpose as we bring in more partners and co-produce the programme – and 'how' we do that sets the foundations of good working practice among the partners and helps us to build trust. It hasn't been smooth, and we don't expect it to be smooth moving forward and we know it means an investment of time to practice the 'how' of working together. This may slow us down but we anticipate that 'what' we achieve will be stronger, more impactful, and more relevant to those the programme is for.

My learning through this experience has been that clearly focusing on the 'how' can be more inclusive, increase diversity of engagement, thought and leadership and increase ownership of the 'what'.

2. Setting up with power in mind

If an alliance is set up concretely from the beginning with a hierarchical structure that puts those with power at the decision making table from day one, it is much harder to shift it later. In the Feminist Humanitarian Network I initiated, we agreed that from the beginning 70 per cent of participants needed to be from local and national women's organisations where power needed to shift. The humanitarian space and system is dominated by a patriarchal western-led model, and decisions over resources are made primarily in the global North. It was unacceptable to the members of the network to replicate problematic systemic power structures in the setting up of a new feminist space: decision making had to be closest to those who were most marginalised and overlooked by the system. Arguably many international and national organisations are facing the same challenges of how to shift decision-making to where people are most affected, when they have been set up on a power-centric model and when resources are being further squeezed and increasingly centralised. Here, my learning has been that to have a strong power analysis at the start of an initiative can help to identify ways of governing the initiative that challenge – rather than reinforce – negative power structures.

3. Accountability in relationships

As we build partnerships and relationships, accountability should be at their heart. In Turn2us we ran a Covid response programme with a range of partners, and at the centre of our collaboration we developed an accountability framework that held us, and the other partners, to account for our actions in relation to the programme. It held us, as the funding organisation, to account for our actions so that we used our power responsibly within the programme. This was the first time we had used this model in a partnership, and we hoped that it would enable us to share power. Our programme accountability areas under which we created specific commitments were:

- transparency, information and two-way communication;
- participation and inclusion;
- monitoring, evaluation and learning;
- complaints, feedback and response;
- use of resources.

Our learning from this was that as a new 'tool' in a partnership it took some time to embed and gain understanding. However, the partners were complimentary about the partnership model that we set up and we felt comfortable holding each other to account. Moving forward we want to improve this practice, roll it out more broadly in our partnerships and set up an organisational accountability framework that sits alongside our new strategy. Perhaps there is a future where there is an accountability framework for all grant makers ... or even for the charity sector.

So where will this learning take Turn2us, our partnerships and our drive to continue to find a Better Way to contribute to ending financial hardship?

Acknowledging that we, as individuals in Turn2us, are not experts in understanding everyone's financial hardship is hard, but important, and allows us to be open to deeper co-production, working alongside people, communities, and their organisations who are facing the grossest injustices to listen, learn and continuously improve.

We will continue to learn from the expertise, initiatives and ambitions of the Better Way network and contribute our own learning and thinking because we know that we can only succeed if we work collaboratively and keep learning.

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