



## **Issue Brief #1: Partnering for Success in the Social Innovation Fund**

November 2014

## Introduction

The Social Innovation Fund (SIF) unites public and private resources to grow community solutions based on evidence of strong results. The SIF makes grants to experienced grant-making intermediaries, which identify promising programs within communities, match the federal funds dollar-for-dollar, hold open competitions to distribute funds to high-performing nonprofit organizations, and conduct independent and rigorous evaluations of the interventions. SIF subgrantees also match the funding they receive and evaluate their programs. SIF intermediary grantees collaborate with a host of partners at multiple levels to implement their programs.

### Key Partners for SIF Intermediaries:

- ✓ CNCS
- ✓ Evaluators
- ✓ Subgrantees
- ✓ Match funders
- ✓ Local and community-based organizations

### Key Research Question:

What are the keys to success for effectively planning, executing, strengthening, and reassessing partnerships to implement the SIF model?

Meaningful collaborations and partnerships can lead to more effective management, increased capacity, valuable insights, and greater success for intermediaries and subgrantees. This issue brief is informed by insights from two SIF intermediaries from the 2010 cohort and two from the 2011 cohort with extensive experience forming and sustaining partnerships. These intermediaries used their experience with the SIF to reflect on their successes, challenges, and lessons learned about engaging in meaningful partnerships as part of the SIF. It provides action-oriented recommendations for how current, incoming, and prospective SIF intermediaries, as well as organizations that might implement a SIF model, can develop key partnering capacities.

## Findings

The SIF intermediaries made clear that successful partnerships require consistent investment of time and ongoing commitment from the partners. They consistently identified five common characteristics that lead to success in planning, executing, strengthening, and reassessing partnerships:

- Aligning partners' goals and objectives;
- Identifying complementary skills, resources, and capacities;
- Establishing roles and operationalizing partnerships;
- Building relationships and establishing trust; and
- Revisiting and reassessing partnerships.

## Aligning Partners' Objectives and Goals

Partnerships are a cornerstone of the SIF, and they add a great deal of value to intermediaries' activities. However, partnerships are only appropriate if the involved parties agree on similar goals and objectives. It can be easy for one partner to be so focused on its own agenda that the other partners' goals are overlooked. Successful partnerships are grounded not only in philosophical alignment, shared values, and similar desired outcomes, but also in a clear recognition of what each partner will gain from investing time and energy in a collaboration. For example, a mutual desire for data to drive decision-making could catalyze collaboration between a SIF intermediary and other partners with slightly different agendas, as long as all partners benefit from collecting the data. SIF intermediaries emphasized that successful engagement with national funders, match funders, and evaluators involves identifying

"If you want to go fast, go alone.  
If you want to go far, go  
together."

– African proverb

shared objectives and goals and focusing on the benefit each partner brings to the other(s).

A collaboration between AIDS United, a 2010 SIF grantee, and its evaluation partner demonstrates the importance of shared objectives and philosophies. The mission of AIDS United is to end the AIDS epidemic in the U.S. It recognizes that HIV is a complex issue, people living with HIV often experience stigma, and it is difficult to quantify the results of HIV care. AIDS United engaged Johns Hopkins University as an evaluation partner, in part because both organizations were philosophically aligned about the sensitivities of providing HIV care. Both organizations were committed to performing a rigorous evaluation of the program that produced concrete outcomes, but they also both agreed that providing HIV care that recognizes the social complexities of the disease and is sensitive to the stigma that patients face is of utmost importance. Johns Hopkins University performed its evaluation with this philosophy in mind, resulting in a successful evaluation partnership.

A partnership between The U.S. Soccer Foundation, a 2011 SIF grantee, and one of its funders demonstrates the importance of shared goals between the partners. The U.S. Soccer Foundation emphasized the importance of identifying how its program can help potential partners achieve their goals and objectives. The U.S. Soccer Foundation has a funding partnership with the Aetna Foundation, which sought to fund work based on a specific set of objectives. While holding firm to the design of its evidence-based program, the U.S. Soccer Foundation was able to articulate how its program fundamentally aligned with Aetna's goals of promoting wellness, health, and access to high-quality health care for everyone, while supporting the communities it serves. With a clear vision of how the program addressed both partners' goals and objectives, the partnership has thrived.

"You can't do this work without deep partnerships."

– 2014 SIF Convening participant

### Recommendations:

- ✓ Articulate your organization's mission, objectives, and desired outcomes.
- ✓ Understand your partners' missions, objectives, and desired outcomes.
- ✓ When possible, choose partners (e.g., evaluation partners, subgrantees, or funders) that are aligned with your program's mission and approach to serving the community.
- ✓ Seek ways to effectively align partners' objectives and desired outcomes, even when alignment is not easily recognizable.
- ✓ Identify how you and your partners can help each other achieve mutual goals and objectives.

## Identifying Complementary Skills, Resources, and Capacities

Partnerships add value when each partner brings skills, resources, and strategies to the table that complement or reinforce one another. Successful partnerships expand the number and range of capacities that contribute to achieving a shared objective. To establish effective partnerships, intermediaries emphasized that it is important to assess the capacities the project needs in order to succeed, be realistic about which capacities do and do not exist within the organization, and identify partners that provide capacities that fill key needs.

AIDS United successfully implemented its patient navigation model for HIV care by collaborating with academics, experts in the field, and strong implementing partners. AIDS United relies on these thought partners to provide insights and resources that complement the HIV care that it provides. For example, AIDS United prioritizes serving young, black, gay and bisexual men through its initiatives, because they are affected so disproportionately by HIV. AIDS United's implementing partners used their strong ties to the affected communities to propose strategies for effectively reaching out to and engaging these populations, in order to improve provision of needed HIV care.

## Recommendations:

- ✓ Identify the capacities and resources you need to accomplish your goals.
- ✓ Compare the needs with an honest assessment of your own capacities and resources.
- ✓ Identify the capacities and resources potential partners bring to the table.
- ✓ Look at other intermediaries' programs for ideas about the range of ways partnerships can add value.
- ✓ Maximize value by selecting partners with complementary or reinforcing skills, resources, and capacities.

## Establishing Roles and Operationalizing Partnerships

Intermediaries reported that in the most successful collaborations, the partners come to explicit agreement about what is to be accomplished, what each partner brings to the table, what role each partner will play, and the activities and outputs each partner will contribute to reach the project's collective goals. Expectations and roles are often documented with formal contracts or memoranda of understanding (e.g., evaluators, community engagement), but sometimes less formal approaches (e.g., records of meetings that capture agreements about roles and responsibilities) make sense. Written records provide immediate clarity about how each partner will contribute to the collective effort. For example, when Jobs for the Future does not have a formal contract with a partner, it nevertheless strives to document agreements through meeting notes that reflect the roles that each member of the partnership agrees to play, each member's priorities, and the goals of the relationship. Such notes will ensure that, should there be future staffing changes in either organization, the new leaders will have insights into the partnership to allow the relationship to stay on track.

Some collaborations have distinct roles for each partner, while others require partners to share roles or serve in multiple roles. In its partnership with its subgrantees, the U.S. Soccer Foundation assumes the roles of financial backer and motivator. As financial backer, the U.S. Soccer Foundation addresses financial matters, evaluations, and expectation-setting around federal compliance. As motivator, the Foundation helps its subgrantees develop their programs and make a difference in the community by pushing, encouraging, and brainstorming.

## Recommendations:

- ✓ Establish each partner's role(s) in achieving agreed-upon goals.
- ✓ Record roles and expectations formally, with contracts or memoranda of understanding, or informally, with meeting notes that capture key decisions and role assignments.
- ✓ Deepen partnerships with subgrantees through supporting roles, such as financial backer and motivator.

## Building Relationships and Establishing Trust

Some intermediaries emphasized that successful partnerships are made up of partners who are flexible, approachable, and inspire a strong level of trust. Asking questions like "Can I work effectively with this partner?" and "Can I trust this partner?" are as important as asking, "Does this partner have the capacities required to do the work?"

"You can purchase implementation, but you have to inspire collaboration."

—2014 SIF Convening participant

SIF intermediaries must trust and be trusted by their partners. It can be difficult or seem risky for grantees to be honest with funders about problems that arise, but this level of trust is necessary for partnerships to work. AIDS United built trust with

SIF Program Officers, who help grantees understand requirements and comply with program rules. The Program Office proactively confronted and communicated issues when they arose, documented them well, and found solutions. SIF intermediaries credited SIF Program Officers with building trust by avoiding any sense of blame. Instead, intermediaries felt that Program Officers had a clear understanding of the challenges intermediaries and subgrantees face, and engaged as problem-solving colleagues, focused on finding solutions when problems arose.

Trust also helps intermediaries navigate challenges. For example, when SIF intermediaries engage existing partners as subgrantees, they must hold them to a new set of expectations, including rigorous evaluations, financial accountability, and strong outcomes. When 2011 SIF grantee Mile High United Way's subgrantees struggled with this shift in expectations, staff kept the conversation positive and proactive through open and honest conversations with the subgrantees and their Program Officer about the need for subgrantee capacity building. Once the needs were clarified, Mile High United Way hired a grant compliance officer to help subgrantees build the financial accountability skills the SIF required.

SIF intermediaries often underestimate the time it takes to build deep relationships with key partners. But they strongly believe that it is time well spent, and encourage others to invest in frequent personal interactions, proactive information exchanges, and small-scale accomplishments over time to build effective relationships.

#### Recommendations:

- ✓ Invest significant staff time and resources in building and maintaining relationships and nurturing collaboration. This can be worth it when the partners' combined efforts make a measurable difference.
- ✓ Identify partners with "soft skills" that facilitate problem solving and build trust and apply those skills throughout the life of the partnership.
- ✓ Build partnerships over time by identifying opportunities to interact and share information.
- ✓ Engage in open and honest conversations about challenges and solutions, and celebrate successes.

## Revisiting and Reassessing Partnerships

Partnerships are never static, so it is important to revisit and reassess agreed-upon objectives, expectations, and roles throughout the life of a partnership. It is also important to ensure the opportunity cost of engaging in the partnership does not outweigh the benefits of investing the resources required for the partnership elsewhere.

Revisiting a partnership is especially important if there are changes in a partnership's objectives or its membership. For example, the U.S. Soccer Foundation found that as its evaluation objectives moved from implementation study to impact study, it was important to revisit its needs and select a new evaluator with appropriate expertise to conduct the impact study.

### Spotlight on Evaluation Partnerships: Mile High United Way and Butler Institute for Families

Mile High United Way (Mile High) attributes the success of its evaluation partnership with the Butler Institute for Families (Butler) to the two partners' complimentary skills, compatible values, "soft skills," and relationship-building. Butler has been providing cross-site and subgrantee evaluation support to Mile High since the beginning of its involvement in the SIF.

Key factors that led Mile High to enter into a formal partnership with Butler included research capacity, proximity, and ability to hold frequent in-person meetings, but it was Butler's "soft skills" that set it apart from other potential research partners. Mile High placed strong emphasis on partnering with an evaluator who not only had evaluation capacity but was also flexible, approachable, and had a work style that was compatible with Mile High.

Mile High sought a partner who trusted them, could be trusted, and could build meaningful relationships with subgrantees and other research partners. Mile High nurtured this relationship, built on a strong foundation of trust, by engaging with Butler as often as several times per week, and encouraging frequent interaction between Butler and the subgrantees. Based on the success of this partnership, Mile High is applying this model of relationship-oriented partnerships to similar efforts within the organization.

Revisiting a partnership's expectations periodically also provides the opportunity to reassess the value of continuing the partnership and whether the roles, directions, or level of formality need to be adjusted. For example, Jobs for the Future (JFF) has had success with an informal information exchange with a national association of alternative staffing agencies holding complimentary goals and objectives. JFF can easily imagine the partners revisiting the nature of this relationship and deciding to grow it into a more formally-recognized partnership. But the partners will only formalize their partnership if doing so will add value for both parties.

**Recommendations:**

- ✓ Periodically revisit and reassess the partnership's shared objectives, goals, and expectations.
- ✓ If partners diverge, reinforce shared goals, revise roles and expectations, or disband the partnership.
- ✓ Apply lessons learned to the future of the partnership and to other partnerships.

## About This Issue Brief

This document is a product of the National Assessment of the Social Innovation Fund (SIF), which seeks to document and capture the impact the SIF has on key program stakeholders. Its findings will tell the story of the SIF and identify lessons learned. The National Assessment is sponsored by the Corporation for National and Community Service's Office of Research and Evaluation and conducted by ICF International.

The following people participated in interviews to inform this issue brief:

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## About the Social Innovation Fund

The Social Innovation Fund (SIF) is a key White House initiative and program of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). The SIF awards grants to organizations who demonstrate success to identify, validate, and grow promising approaches to challenges facing local communities. The operating model of the Social Innovation Fund is distinguished by the following six elements:

Innovation | Evidence | Scale | Grantmakers | Match | Knowledge Sharing

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