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Four mistakes Russian donors make in the work with local communities



Alina Shenfeldt, International Cooperation Lead at Russian Donors Forum reflects below on a session held during the 5 day Russian Donors Forum annual conference 'The Role of philanthropy and social investments in achieving the SDGs'. The particular session, on 'partnerships day', addressed the question 'how (not) to waste your money in working with local communities' involved a fun role play between donors and NGOs and concluding remarks from James Magowan, coordinating Director, ECFI. Alina highlights four common mistakes and identifies solutions.

Partnerships with local communities and community foundations have traditionally been one of the key areas for Russian business and grant-making foundations. In 2018, 63 % of the companies prioritized the work with local communities in their corporate social responsibility strategies, according to 2018 Leaders of Corporate Philanthropy in Russia research¹.

On 19-23 October 2020, Russian Donors Forum hosted its 18th Annual Conference, one of the major events on philanthropy and social investment in Russia, and devoted one of the sessions to local philanthropy. Though there is quite a substantial body of knowledge on the efficient ways of working with local communities, there are still common mistakes and even failures.

Panelists of the event addressed these challenges in an engaging manner - by stepping into the shoes of a new donor which embarks on a journey of supporting local communities. The panelists - among them representatives of grant-making and community foundations and companies based across all Russia: Saint-Petersburg, the Penza oblast and Ural Region, Siberia, Chukotka and Sakhalin - came up with the mistakes that a new donor would typically make and suggested viable solutions.

¹ 2018 Leaders of Corporate Philanthropy (Russian only) http://www.donorsforum.ru/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Lider_2019_web.pdf

Mistake #1: Donating to the most well-known 2-3 NGOs of the area without a in-depth analysis of local needs.

Solution: The purpose of investing in local communities is to identify groups with a big potential to make a change for their community. One of the most efficient approaches to do so is to launch a grant competition among local charities to ensure an unbiased identification of “hidden gems” and foster local leadership.

Mistake #2: Invite trending “national” coaches to provide training for local charity staff.

Solution: Use advice and expertise of community foundations and “resource centers” to understand the needs and challenges of local communities.

Mistake #3. Apply business metrics to measure social impact.

Solution: Develop customized monitoring and evaluation tools, ingrain evaluation at early stages and invite independent experts.

Mistake #4. Act alone.

Solution: Build partnerships among donors to ensure synergy. Developing local communities is a complex task, therefore collaboration among companies (or foundations and companies) acting in the same territory is indispensable. Sadly, it is not the case at the moment and there is still more competition among donors rather than collaboration.

Philanthropy support organisations have their role to play in increasing awareness among companies and foundations on best practices in the work with local communities. At Russian Donors Forum, we hope to continue this conversation and encourage collaborative approaches to local philanthropy.

Watch the session (with interpretation into English) [here](#).