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Over and out: FRRR's Alexandra Gartmann bids the sector a fond farewell

by Alexandra Gartmann | October 1, 2015



After four and a half years in the philanthropic sector, FRRR CEO Alexandra Gartmann is moving on. In this piece, she reflects on her time in philanthropy, how it has changed and what is left to do.

When I joined Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR) in April 2011, I was new to the philanthropic sector.

I really didn't know what I was getting myself into—I was just excited at the prospect of sitting on the 'other' side of the funding table, and being able to support rural communities.

A few years on, I am now absolutely convinced about the critical role the sector can play in building stronger communities, and in catalysing partnerships and collaboration. Here are my thoughts, arranged in six key actions, that I believe will build an even stronger philanthropic sector.

1 – See both sides of the fence

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People in rural communities know FRRR as a source of funding, but to the philanthropic sector, we are a grant-seeker or conduit to reach non-DGR organisations and communities beyond line of sight of a metropolitan based funder. I have been concurrently collaborating as a grant-maker, but precariously balancing hats and constantly focused on fundraising.

FRRR is a unique organisation that operates with a relatively small corpus of only \$15 million, but is granting \$8 million per year. Our financial corpus scale bears very little relationship to the financial impact we can have utilising our other capabilities, knowledge and networks. Scale can be irrelevant to

impact!

However, like many mid-size charities, I spent most of my time seeking funding. Keeping the doors open – or in our case ensuring we had funds to enable us to invest in rural, regional and remote communities – is not an activity that is optional. It is so easy to get consumed with raising money, as opposed to strategic change or trying something new and different.

Over the last few years I have seen evolution in the sector, with longer term partnerships being established between funders and non-profit organisations, the donation of time and skill enabling more strategic initiatives and sustainability just as much as financial investment. The trendy discussion about investing in capacity, individuals and organisations is translating into actual investments.

While FRRR has many long-term partnerships, there are many that are renewed annually—or that require a full new application. I encourage philanthropists to consider committing to more long-term funding partnerships. That allows the organisation—whether it's FRRR or a community group—to get on with actually making a difference, rather than chasing funding.

2 -Collaborate more

While co-funding is great, there is far more power in true collaboration. One such example, still in its early days, is the Innovation for Community Impact program. Working together, government and philanthropic donors determined the focus areas, grant-making approach, types of projects to fund, and collectively assessed applications. It would be great to see more of such interaction—using knowledge and networks

	\$2.75 million

Dr Chau Chak Wing to Sydney University	\$15 million

Ian Potter Foundation to State Library Victoria	\$10 million

The Estate of Graham Theo Flint to Central Gippsland Health Service	\$1.5 million

Ian Potter Foundation to 113 recipients including \$400,000 over three years to Bush Heritage Australia and \$347,000 over three years to The Nature Conservancy of Australia Trust	
	\$3.7 million total
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October 21 @ 5:30 pm - 8:30 pm
The Funding Network: Sydney

October 29 @ 5:30 pm - 8:30 pm
The Funding Network: Melbourne

of numerous funders alongside government and sharing insights and rationale for decisions.

We can also collaborate more on organisation and issue research and understanding. One of the highlights of my time as CEO was participating in a US study tour, funded by Perpetual, and being involved in a research project undertaken by QUT, examining the benefits to be had from bringing the CEOs of charities together around the issue of fundraising. It had a profound impact, both on me personally and on the things I sought to do at FRRR, and what FRRR has embraced and embedded.

I have seen exponential growth of philanthropic CEOs and operational staff sharing knowledge and experience. Some led by Philanthropy Australia on issues, others led by sector leaders drawing on personal networks, to explore the more intimate challenges of operating in a field that is still maturing in Australia. These intimate engagements and honest discussions gave me more fodder for reflection and action than many more formal structures ever did.

3 - Engage beyond your horizon - visual and temporal



November 6 @ 9:30 am - 2:30 pm

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November 9 @ 9:30 am - 2:30 pm

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There are often valuable workshops or meetings in Sydney and Melbourne, but little effort goes into making them accessible for those in philanthropy outside those cities. If we want to grow the sector, we have to engage beyond our own horizon and sphere of influence. And that means engaging with other philanthropists in regional areas or other capital cities. I know the challenges of distance only too well, but if you think laterally and make the effort to engage, you will be rewarded. Many a night saw me on a plane or on the road back to Bendigo after a stimulating range of discussions.

Yet there seems to be an expectation that country people can easily come to the 'big smoke', almost a perspective that it's faster for them to get into the city than for city folk to take the same road out of town. Face to face contact is fabulous—and important—but these days technology allows us to nurture relationships. That said, there is still nothing like seeing things first hand. So I encourage donors to think laterally. Get out and about—go to the applicants; don't always make them to come to you. And if you are serious about investing in rural and regional, recognise that those non-profit organisations have significant travel costs, and perhaps support them to engage in opportunities in Sydney and Melbourne.

For many of the partnerships I cultivated, it was a two year courting period before a formal arrangement was in place. And given some of the shorter term arrangements, I was constantly 'meeting and greeting' in order to secure a pipeline of partnerships that could support rural demand. I was often the connector for those who, due to distance, geography or lack of knowledge of philanthropy, were not able to engage with funders and benefit from philanthropic partnerships. FRRR is absolutely crucial to enabling these connections.

4 -Be more open

Philanthropy is a little mysterious, and not particularly transparent. It took me some time to get my head

around it—to understand the sector, to make connections, to get to know the key players. I was fortunate to be embraced by a number of experienced leaders, who helped me decode it. While there does need to be more transparency within the sector, there are now inspiring examples of Foundations making big strides in communicating their strategies, decision making processes and the organisations they invest in.

Many funders ask for lots of information from non-profit organisations about what they do, how they operate, their strategy, their financial situation and governance. Yet it doesn't flow the other way. Even within the sector, it would be great to see more funders talking about what, who and how they are funding. This lack of understanding within our sector stifles collaboration—it's impossible when you don't know what others are doing.

Greater transparency would also benefit unusual suspects and help them gain access to philanthropy, as well as grow grassroots philanthropy. The reality is that when people see what can happen, they are more likely to become engaged themselves.



5 – Don't dismiss small grants

As I have said frequently, small grants play a vital role, especially in smaller rural and remote communities, or with smaller organisations operating at the local scale. I hope the sector will continue to offer small grants, as they can make such a difference: they can be catalytic, or just fill gaps that can't be

met locally. They aren't sexy and funders are often drawn to larger scale projects, but grants that help groups address and alleviate every day issues are critical to creating the space to address the intractable issues.

6 – Be more proactive when it comes to disaster recovery and preparedness

While the dial has moved a lot when it comes to strategic philanthropy and disasters—largely due to FRRR and a few passionate donors—it hasn't gone nearly far enough, especially in light of the climatic scenarios we are likely to face.

Many donors don't see they have a role to play. We need broader engagement and to change the sector's thinking about disaster recovery and preparedness. I encourage funders to think about what they will do if a disaster strikes an area or a sector they fund, and plan how they can respond. Funders should prepare a strategy for disasters, just as we encourage the non-profit organisations and communities to prepare. For example, those who fund in the arts could help groups they fund to prepare plans to respond in the event of a flood, fire, drought or cyclone. Or perhaps funding could be redirected toward arts projects that help affected communities recover.

Australia is a lead nation—for both frequency and severity of natural disasters—but also for knowledge and practice in resilience. The Australian philanthropic sector has an opportunity to be a global leader in planning for, and responding to disasters and the impacts they have on those we aim to support with our work.



Thank you

I have really only scratched the surface of opportunity for philanthropy, government and rural Australia to partner and leverage each other's assets. FRRR will continue to grow these, and my dream is for every philanthropic individual and institution to be investing time, treasure or talent in a rural, regional or remote community. I will remain involved in a number of ways—influencing policy, supporting knowledge of rural and regional Australia, and being an active philanthropist.

I have met hundreds of amazing people—both in community groups across Australia and in funding organisations—who do amazing work. I thank you all for the support you've given me, and assure you that I will continue to advocate for philanthropy.



Alexandra Gartmann is passionate about rural communities and creating opportunities for each community to prosper. Since 2011, she has served as CEO of the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal. From late October, she will become Managing Director of Rural Bank.

Alexandra is a member of the National Rural Advisory Council, the Prime Minister's Community Business Partnership, Chair of the CSIRO Agriculture Flagship Advisory Council, member of the Victorian Agriculture Advisory Council, a Director of Rural Bank, RIRDC National Rural Issues Consultative Group, the Crawford Fund and the La Trobe University Bendigo Regional Advisory Board.

Images courtesy FRRR.



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