

Issues Flagged and For Further Discussion

A. Running list of issues encountered and choices made¹:

1. Terminology: We have all been struggling with terminology to some extent. For some time, we used the terms “strategy” and “strategic framework” but we recognize that these terms are far from ideal. We have considered all the terms in the below chart, and finally settled on “OSF shared framework”.

OSF	Joint Cross-cutting Shared Collaborative Cooperative Connective	Initiative Strategy Strategic Framework Strategic Initiative Framework Campaign
-----	---	---

2. The suggestion of an online information exchange and discussion forum obviously will need to be discussed with Mary Cadagin and the IT department. The design team recognizes that we have been remiss in not flagging this issue before now, primarily because of our very compressed timeframe. There is some question as to how particularly tailored such a platform would need to be, or if it would be possible at least initially to use some off-the-shelf or Google platform. One of the “learn as you go” issues that OSF should monitor will be how this online space is actually used in practice, and what potential uses OSF staff see for it. For more discussion of this question, see “Issue b” below.
3. We recognize that this modality of three SMC members endorsing an outline as well as the other roles envisioned for the SMC imply a significant time commitment that has not been fully discussed with the SMC.
4. We recognize that external stakeholders, including some partner organizations should be involved in crafting OSF strategies, although it is not clear how and when. One suggestion is for this kind of consultation to take place in Phase 3 (during the development of specific strategies); another is to carry out some kind of consultation earlier, in Phase 1 or 2, before an OSF approval of the framework. We have chosen not to specify the details of how that would happen but recognize that it does need to be part of the process, and that this will add complexity. See Issue B.1 (“the Prime Mover problem”) for an explanation of why. In the spirit of learning as we go (see issue B.4), it will be important for OSF to engage with the first shared frameworks to see when the developers of these frameworks feel it is most useful to engage external stakeholders and to better understand the implications for the process of when and how this consultation is carried out.

The earlier stages would tend to focus on general "what should we do" questions, while the later ones might focus on "how should we do it". In the earlier stages, we would want to avoid partners lobbying us about what we should do (i.e. fund their priority issues), while we'd want to get input from partners and other knowledgeable external voices early enough to avoid converting a potentially useful consultation into a mere request to tweak what OSF has already decided to do.

¹ Note: An earlier version of this list contained a number of additional issues, which the design team felt had been largely resolved through discussions with Chris Stone. However, this version contains a number of issues which the design team recommends that OSF monitor and document in the experiences of the first shared frameworks in order to be able to adjust the process where needed.

B. Issues for discussion:

1. The “Prime Mover” problem and involvement of external stakeholders

OSF shared frameworks and strategies have been conceived as a way for OSF to concentrate and align its resources for a specific large-scale intervention. OSF cannot do all this on its own: grantees and other external partners will be absolutely essential for their success. But unless they are involved in crafting those strategies, they will have little sense of ownership and commitment to them. Here are a couple of salutary warnings:

If [strategy] is created by just one party in a complex network of partners, it is seldom owned by everyone. In their efforts to be more strategic, some foundations in the study are experiencing a tension between owning [strategy] and being collaborative; between aiming to increase impact by directing more resources toward one theory of change, versus transforming the way they think of their relationship with grantees and other stakeholders to a partnership... We heard examples of program failures that were attributed to the theory, metrics and plan having been overly defined by the foundation, which resulted in low ownership and commitment from grantees, and the bulk of the responsibility remaining with the foundation. - Marilyn Darling “A Compass in the Woods”

Considerable havoc has been wrought, and billions of dollars wasted, by donors whose success in business or other fields has convinced them that they can single-handedly solve a social problem that no one else has solved before. Philanthropists cannot catalyze change by acting alone or imposing a solution, convinced that they have the answer before they begin. Instead, they must listen to and work with others, enabling stakeholders to develop their own solutions. - Mark Kramer, “Catalytic Philanthropy”

A sentence has been inserted in the description of Phase 3 which suggests that external stakeholders need to be involved in the development phase, though without suggesting exactly how that would happen.

2. Assumptions about the Souk

There are a number of assumptions behind the design of the Souk. First among them is the assumption that sending draft framework and strategy ideas out early and often will improve their effectiveness. Another is that the Souk will become a real platform for idea exchange, engagement and collaboration. These assumptions may or may not be borne out in practice.

One danger is a potential dynamic of piling on, watering down, and dragging under. Good ideas put on the Souk may become unrecognizable as others add all nature of additional comments. Who curates for each idea? It seems logical that those who post an idea should be the arbiters of the comments that come in through the network about that idea. So, if they are open and others provide good input, the outline can change and improve. If input is poor, or if originators are not open, the process may not achieve the end it seeks. Might we see a rush to post particular ideas that are likely to be good potential shared frameworks in order for authors to plant their flag on a particular issue, and thus have the “right” to develop it? Will people begin lobbying their ideas with Senior Management before the ideas are even posted as an outline? If so, are those people closer physically and organizationally to senior managers more likely to be heard? Could the Souk become a kind of window dressing of openness and collaboration, when in fact it is simply a platform for sharing information or (worse) a fig leaf that allows business as usual to continue?

Might people look to collaborate and develop ideas outside of and prior to posting on the Souk in order to better control what happens to their idea? In that case, the collaboration and idea exchange is still taking place, but not necessarily how we initially imagined, and the Souk may be more of a sharing tool than a collaboration tool.

Some of these issues can be partially addressed in how the platform is designed (e.g. who has the authority to moderate comments; can participants rate comments so they become more visible or less visible, etc.). Others will need to be addressed by senior staff.

We see the value of the Souk, but we also see that our best intentions might be inadvertently undermined. Perhaps we should be more humble, curious and tolerant about how exactly it will be used, and cautious about investing resources and raising expectations (for example, by commissioning a new and expensive technological solution when something off the shelf might serve much the same purpose).

3. “Boldness” and a potentially false dichotomy

In recent drafts, it appears that we have elevated the notion of boldness and audacity as a prime underpinning characteristic above others. This may be a misplaced emphasis, and may be the product of a false dichotomy between, on the one hand, being the humble, subordinate, voiceless funder, taking direction from local actors; and on the other hand, being the bold and audacious chief actor—the “prime mover” and agent of change. Both of these notions seem to miss the point; there is a better way. The one view seems to assume that we can’t expect too much and should simply limit ourselves to supporting the status quo of existing organizational agendas, while the other seems to imply elbowing others aside and asserting our primacy as the one actor that really matters. Both are inadequate to the role and identity that OSF ought to assume. OSF should be able first to see and read the field, understand the context and history, the actors and their agendas, the issues and dynamics, and then to be creative, to propose changes to the incentive structures, to help alter the magnetic field within which local, national and international actors operate. This is more of a creative honest broker role. It requires assuming a role of strategist, good and trustworthy partner whose loyalty is to principles and not to any one particular organization or relationship, but respecting local actors’ perspectives and expertise while offering our own perspective and creative thinking. The issues we work on are complex and dynamic, and require equal parts boldness, creativity, and respect.

Two provisos however: This may actually not be about “boldness”: a framework or strategy can be bold and ambitious while the donor remains a humble servant, responding to the needs of the community. 2. OSF needs to do more than see, understand, propose, etc., -- it has to engage potential partners in a dialogue and get them involved in crafting the strategies before they’re rolled out.

4. Learning as we go

This is a new process, and we are sure to make mistakes in setting it up. We need to have ways of tracking this experiment, finding out what is working in practice, and adjusting accordingly. Thus in choosing between being loose and tight in our guidance, we feel our bias should be towards the looser end of the spectrum. We should not necessarily try to set up the perfect system right out of the box, and should accommodate a variety of options (for developing and vetting frameworks, for structuring relations between contributing units, for retaining accountability, and for monitoring and assessing) that suit the topics that will emerge in the first year or two. After that period we will have a better sense of what is working. **We want guidelines that will flex with users rather than something rigid that might crack under pressure or cause participants to abandon it.**

An example might be the issue of how we (re)allocate resources, human and financial, to support this shared work. To what extent do resources need to be concentrated to pursue shared frameworks? Our proposed draft allows for a variety of options, but subgroup 3 seems to have come down on the side of always having at least some centralized structure and resources. Should we leave flexibility to allow for a variety of approaches? Or are we sure that effective coordination and strong accountability require a new structure?

At the very least, we're agreed on the importance of being clear on what our standards are at each step in the process and who is responsible for ensuring they are upheld. Our draft tries to reflect this but could certainly use improvement.

We have identified some specific issues that we will not pretend to resolve immediately, but that OSF should document as pilot experiences move forward, so that we can learn and adjust. Surely there will be more issues to add to this list:

- Who across the network engage through the Souk? In practice, do some actors engage proactively while others tend to be more responsive?
- Where have the ideas or topics that became OSF frameworks come from? Were they posted as preliminary ideas and then developed through engagement on the Souk? Were they posted as fairly developed ideas after a fair amount of engagement among a few different programs, leaving the Souk to play more of an informational role rather than an idea exchange and development role?
- Are we leaning too much on a set of "pillars" that don't exist yet, or are not fully equipped to take on the roles we are envisioning? i.e. an internal facilitation unit, new roles and expectations for senior managers and the Global Board.
- Is there the right amount of information at each phase of the process to allow good decision-making to take place? What are SMC managers requiring, in practice, of framework ideas they engage with before agreeing to be sponsors? Do decision-makers at each level believe that they have the necessary information on which to base their decisions?
- What role has the Souk played in practice, and how essential has that role been in the development of shared frameworks? What has been the quality and nature of engagement in the Souk?
- Has this process encouraged rigor and strong reasoning within the development of OSF shared frameworks?
- Has the process spawned bold, innovative frameworks or strategies that are effective in bringing about change? Alternatively, are there signs that the process has created an inherent bias against bold and risky ideas? Does the number of stages in the process, the evidence and arguments that need to be marshaled, the hoops an idea has to jump through, and the numerous committees and juries that review and approve it made it less likely it is that a truly audacious, world-changing idea will make it through the process without being watered down to an overly sensible lowest common denominator?

5. Concern about where the burden is. Geographic and advocacy buy-in

To work, this system will require a lot of participation from the whole network. Although we all work hard, the amount of time we have to devote to browsing the Souk, participating in a charrette, etc. may differ considerably (not to mention barriers of internet access, language, and time zones). Will this process end up privileging some actors over others?

There is a tension between the idea that a shared framework should not go ahead in a particular region without geographic program signoff, and that geographic programs will need to seriously consider a large number of potential frameworks. Geographic programs should not be compelled to participate in OSF shared frameworks, and we discussed the idea that a framework could not go ahead in a particular region without the geographic program's signoff. Rather than considering this a "veto," we expect that the process we have proposed is robust enough to allow for any such issues to be resolved well before a framework reaches approval stage. Geographic programs would need to commit to seriously considering proposals that pertain to their regions, such as by sending a staff member to participate in the beginning stages of development in order for the geographic program to make an informed decision whether its involvement is strategic, is a priority, and whether the team has the capacity to undertake it.

Similarly, each proposal and framework development process would include analysis on whether direct policy advocacy should be a part of the shared framework, where the most strategic policy targets are located, and the level of engagement of OSF's advocacy offices and/or staff. Just as geographic programs would be afforded certain prerogatives for frameworks in their region, if a shared framework identifies locations of advocacy offices as targets, those offices would retain a similar prerogative on those elements of the strategy. Ideally, the advocacy office would be fully engaged with the strategy, but if their own resources, capacities or unit strategy do not allow full engagement, they will still be seen as the OSF representative office to the policy community in their location, and would need to be consulted in advance on any advocacy activities.