

Thinking on OSF Unit Strategies

The following inputs from the SBP design team on templates for unit strategies take as a starting point some of the parameters that Chris shared with the team earlier. Four-year unit strategy documents will be high-level strategy documents that will allow the president, members of the Global Board, and some members of the Senior Management Committee (SMC) to engage with unit strategies in a meaningful way inside of a 60-90 minute review, following which the document (with or without modification) should form the basis for developing plans and budgets for approval through later high-level review. This means that the documents produced should be concise (at most 10 pages), and should demonstrate that unit strategies are thoughtful, rigorous, and monitorable.

Units will need to do the kind of rigorous thinking and planning articulated in a longer document that would likely be reviewed only by the relevant advisory board. (However, in rare cases the Global Board members, or Chris, or other SMC members may also want to drill down for more detail.) So while longer, more detailed strategy documents will be useful for thinking through the unit's approach and as a management tool for implementation and review within the unit, these can be developed before or after the more strategy-focused conversation supported by the shorter documents we envision below. If they are developed before, they may then need to be adjusted based on the strategy review conversation and its conclusions.

1. Summary

A summary table of the unit's major 4-year goals (one sentence for each) and a précis of the strategy for achieving it (max. 100 words).

2. Unit context and history

- a. Key challenges to or opportunities for key open society values in the field in which the unit works.
- b. Key actors related to these challenges and opportunities, their agendas, and the recent history of these issues.
- c. The trajectory of the unit proposing the strategy. When was the unit created? What areas has it focused on? What "tools"¹ has it used in the past, either directly from OSF or through grantmaking to partners who used different tools? What have been the major inflection points in the evolution of the units' strategy and what did those changes respond to? Reviews or evaluations should be briefly mentioned.
- d. What role or roles does the unit play within its field? (See the discussion on level of agency that came out of an SBP team meeting)²

¹ A draft list of tools deployed at OSF is: grantmaking, advocacy, strategic litigation, fellowships/scholarships, direct assistance to governments, equity investments.

² Our level of agency: Chris has noted that unit strategies should reflect three broad categories of work: contributions to shared frameworks; the unit's own, goal-oriented work; and support to the field. The collective sense of our group is that in fact these three categories overlap and even merge – if we do our work as grantmakers well, it should be hard to distinguish between what began as a "field"-generated idea versus something we originated ourselves versus something that is part of a broader OSF effort. Similarly, there is a question as to how neat or a

3. Support to the field

- a. Describe the field in which the unit operates. How mature is the field? What are the chief challenges or issues relevant to the field today? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the actors in this field, understood as a community? Who are the primary beneficiaries of a well-functioning field?
- b. Identify major aims of the unit's proposed support to the field. (e.g., build a field that is just emerging, encourage collaboration across some type of boundary line, help a field deal with a new challenge, sustain key actors in a field as a bulwark against authoritarian tendencies, strengthening particular capacities of the field etc.)
- c. How will the unit go about supporting the field in this way? To what kinds of partners³ does the unit intend to provide financial support, and why?
- d. Measuring progress. How will the unit know that this support is leading to field building? What will be the tangible signs of success?
- e. Learning from the field: how will the unit draw on thinking and innovation in the field to inform its own work?

4. Focused unit-level strategies

- a. Background, context and justification of the problem to be addressed through each strategy. Who are the specific intended beneficiaries? Is OSF well-positioned to address this issue, and what is our comparative advantage? Who are key allies and opponents?
- b. Specific change goals and subsidiary objectives for each goal – concisely expressed both in terms of substance and geography. What is the connection between your field-building activities and your goal-directed strategies⁴? If projected goals will be affected by the variance between "minimal" and "optimal" scenarios outlined in para (4f), please so indicate, and identify goals for each resource scenario.
- c. Strategy— a brief paragraph that lays out how the unit will pursue this change. Most often a unit will use a few strategies, in conjunction with each other, to achieve change. The strategies

distinction may be made between our social investment function and our social impact function, to use Chris's useful terms from the beginning of this process. Many felt that all of our work exists along a continuum of agency, with the most operational work (or the most instrumental use of grantees) at one extreme and the most social investment-type, seeding-the-field kind of work at the other end. There were, however, more differences of opinion over whether this meant, on the one hand, that the articulation of goals should not separate, but rather combine those elements of field and strategic support. Or if, on the other hand, by separating out goals for support to the field versus goals for specific targeted and time-bound strategies, (even if the work of many partner organizations might correspond to both these levels), we could gain in rigor and clarity. This draft opts for the latter view.

³ Although support to the field and unit-level strategy support are interrelated, for the sake of rigor and clarity, this proposal suggests separate thinking for the two levels. It is likely that a number of partner organizations would be involved as grantees both in field-building and in specific focused strategies. Drawing from an idea Chris shared at the beginning of this process, it might be possible to imagine a number of key actors in the field that would qualify through a due diligence process for general (unrestricted funds) support. For these general support grants, we would need to clarify whether support would be approved on the basis of an agreement between OSF and the grantee on a limited number of shared outcomes or whether such grants would solely come with expectations of what the group will achieve based on its proposal and our observations, but without requiring certain streams of work. Potentially, several different units could join to consolidate general support leading to OSF making only one grant (which would not exclude the possibility of providing project grants for certain discrete bodies of work).

⁴ There is a risk that by breaking up our thinking as support to the field and our own strategies, we are somehow missing that critical link between the two. At worst, it could lead to activities quite disconnected from one another.

should be expressed in a way that describes or clarifies how the unit believes that change will come about and what will it do to achieve the change goal and objectives.

- d. Tools. Which tools does the unit expect to deploy in its strategies? Who exactly should be using those tools: OSF itself, a better-positioned third party, or both? Spell out the reasoning behind such choices (i.e., why a given tool is or is not employed; who is best positioned to use it and why).
- e. Risk. Is the strategy high- or low-risk, in terms of the likelihood of success and the potential downside vs. upside impacts? What physical, financial, political, legal or reputational risks could it entail? What could be the possible unintended consequences of success or failure?
- f. Resources. Estimate the resources (possibly two scenarios: minimal and optimal) that will be required to achieve each goal, expressed as a tentative budget figure. What is the potential for leveraging additional resources beyond the unit?
- g. Measuring progress – how will the unit know it is moving in the right direction and distance to achieve its objective?⁵ How will the unit monitor and gather information that gives it an idea of whether and what it is advancing?

5. Contributions to OSF shared frameworks

- a- How has the unit chosen to contribute to existing OSF shared frameworks?
- b- Of the goals that the unit is committed to achieving in some way, are there particular ones that the unit believes could be developed into shared frameworks? Is the unit working on or planning to develop outlines or proposals for cross-cutting strategies?

6. Other anticipated OSF collaborations

The internal collaboration matrix mentioned by Chris.

Summarize other planned or expected collaborations with OSF units on a bilateral/multi-lateral level, or with other funders or non-grantee allies. What added value do these collaborations bring to the work of the unit? (In early versions of the strategy document, this will necessarily be tentative, as units will not have time to approach every potential collaborator.)

7. Unit's organizational plan

Brief description of how the unit intends to develop its own governance and management capacity, efficiency and effectiveness.

Question: How will this kind of three-tier analysis relate to functional units (advocacy, OSJI, others)? Do the same questions apply?

⁵ There are many ways to measure – through indicators, progress markers, benchmarks, etc. OSF may, over time, develop a more coherent way of thinking about measures. However, for the present, we expect it will be sufficient to ask each unit to spell out ways it intends to measure progress. The fact that we do not have one unitary approach does not mean that this part of the strategy review conversation will be any less rigorous. Strategy reviewers are likely to verify the logical relationship between the measures and the change we are seeking to achieve, as well as the availability and accuracy of data.

Functional units should be asked which other units within OSF they are expecting to work with, on what issues; under which circumstances an OSF program should use a given tool (e.g., advocacy, litigation, program-related investments, etc.); and under which circumstances should OSF support local partner organizations to undertake advocacy. For advocacy units, 'keeping faith with the field' means both responding to the internal priorities of OSF and to the policy context in which they operate. Early insights into geographic and thematic unit priorities would ensure the functional units (that are collaboration heavy) are able to reflect those priorities, or are at least able to define their own strategies with an informed understanding of the advocacy priorities of their OSF partners and be able to advise on where they can (or cannot) assist.

ANNEX -- Procedural matters

Compressed schedule:

- The review process proposed for 2013 would be particularly hard on those units scheduled for earlier in the year (February or March). Perhaps two phases could be envisaged, though it would mean a more compressed review schedule: February-March for floating ideas, critique and collaboration and then April-June for strategy formulation, articulation, consultation and approval?
- Foundations and programs that require consultation with boards will be especially hard-pressed to generate coherent strategic thinking in a period of several weeks. In addition, it might not be possible for programs and national foundations to meaningfully engage in strategic discussions ahead of submissions.
- A more staggered approach would help differentiate between smaller units, with fewer staff and scale/scope of operations who could move forward quickly, compared to those units with an inherently more time-consuming internal strategy process. This differentiation between units should be factored in to the process and will help deal with the compressed schedule.

Timeline & responsibility?

- The design team has envisioned shared frameworks that span an average of four years, and expects that unit strategies would be on a similar timeline. If that is the case, is OSF sure that it wants to endorse the current arrangement of units for a period of four years? The most obvious alternative – considering 2014 to be another bridging year while further structural and strategic planning changes set in – is also less than ideal.
- Responsibilities for the unit strategy process: In the past, OIO and OP have managed the unit strategy processes for their respective domains, and the team agrees that making the process unitary would be a real advance. Who, then, will drive it?

Documents:

- With regard to the proposed one-page memo, it would be good to clarify the purpose of distilling country ambitions into a single sentence. This might be particularly difficult for clustered programs which have multiple entities operating in a given country and multiple goals.
- While the idea of a one-pager to kick-start the process and offer/search for collaboration and coherence is great, we should encourage the units to prepare their strategies in the form and format with details that they will be able to use as live document for their implementation, continuous reflection, review and adjustment. We have the opportunity to redress the current separation and dissonance between the documents that get approved (and not used) and the documents (or simply unarticulated plans) that represent the actual work done during the strategy term. The absence of a performance assessment system is one of the clearest reasons for this disconnect; the enactment of one would be a good step towards remedying it.

Suitability of the proposed template for large units?

- For larger units with several quite distinct sub-units, it may not be possible to do all this in 10 pages across programs without having to reduce work to a level of generality that runs counter to most of our thinking to date.
- For larger units, the right level of analysis for strategy may be the sub-unit. For those, the template might actually be better suited if it consisted of a summary table, a one page history/background, and about one page for each initiative within a unit, answering the questions listed.