
Promoting democracy through the arts and media

Lessons and recommendations after 10 years of Creative Force



Summary

Creative Force is a funding programme for international projects run by the Swedish Institute (SI). It is open to Swedish organisations and their partners who work through media or the arts to strengthen democracy, human rights and freedom of expression. The programme covers Africa, MENA (Middle East & North Africa), north-western Russia, and Eastern Europe & Turkey, and is publicly financed through the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

In May 2019, SI organised a day of workshops attended by some 50 representatives of Swedish organisations which have received funding from Creative Force. The aim of the event was to learn from participants' combined experience and expertise in

order to strengthen future projects and carry Creative Force into its next decade.

Participants enthusiastically shared their experience in three interactive sessions which centred on 1) Lessons learned from past projects, 2) Useful advice for future projects, and 3) How SI and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs can best help projects to achieve long-term sustainable effects.

In the course of the workshops, participants identified no less than 130 lessons they had learned from 35 projects in 26 countries. Of these, 33 were seen as particularly important for the future. Here is a selection of them:

- Choose partners on the basis of competence, their willingness to develop, and common driving forces.
- All parties must gain something from the cooperation.
- Don't be afraid to change partners if the cooperation isn't working.
- Thoroughly investigate the cultural, political and social conditions in which the project will take place.
- Listen to local people and understand their problems.
- Build stable local relationships in the partner country.
- Start small-scale and build up the project with the long term in mind.
- Spend plenty of time fact-finding in the start-up phase.
- We never work in a vacuum; project leaders must be prepared to be flexible and change direction when necessary.
- Don't expose anyone to unnecessary risks.
- Do everything you can to counteract corruption.

Key overarching concepts which were touched upon by many participants throughout the day were Context, Partnership, Networking, Knowledge, Flexibility and Communication.

The following insights from an investigative journalism project in Kenya neatly sum up much of what emerged from the workshops:

- The planning stage takes longer than you might expect.
- Put a lot of effort into getting to know each other at the beginning of the project.
- Ownership on equal terms is absolutely essential.
- Local ownership is also absolutely essential.
- Dare to be flexible and revise your plans. Listen to the project participants.
- Be realistic. ‘What can we achieve in one to two years with a given budget?’

Recommendations to SI and the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs

For better *knowledge sharing*:

- Embassies should be more closely involved in the programme. Partly because they are experts on the local context and any potentially sensitive issues, and partly because they can provide safe physical meeting places.
- SI should establish a network of project alumni.
- There should be a contact person at SI who can be consulted at all stages of a project.

For *long-term sustainability*:

- Small grants for pre-pilots should be available.
- It should be easier to extend the length of successful ongoing projects.
- Funding should be available for post-project follow-up.

A longer-term focus enables deeper relationships to be established and gives more opportunity for project development. The downside is that fewer projects can be granted funding, resulting in higher competition.

On a *practical level*, participants discussed the possibility of SI granting financial support to third parties. One example would be support for financial management, so that project partners can focus on the creative side of a project. Participants also suggested that SI’s application and reporting forms could be made simpler and more consistent.

In conclusion

The day produced solid recommendations which all participants could endorse. The lessons we learned are also borne out by research and by similar financing programmes in other countries. Participants urged us to repeat the workshop as part of our continuing efforts to include project owners and target groups in further developing the Creative Force programme. Next time, it was felt, foreign partners and target groups should also be included.

If you are interested in finding out more about the Creative Force programme, have a look at the Swedish Institute’s website:

<https://si.se/en/apply/funding-grants/creative-force/>