

Learning so that we can do better (II)¹

For those interested forensically understanding the whole FG Renewal Process 2019 process, here we go:

In mid-2017, it was recognised that the Facilitation Group needed to change. The intention was never for the FG to exist in perpetuity, but instead that new members would join and old members would leave. It was decided that half the FG should leave each year, so that each year the FG would consist of four old and four new members. The old members provide continuity, and the new members bring new ideas and skills. Of the members leaving, one would be the funder representative, which means that there would be three or four spaces for 'normal' (i.e. voting) members.

The process for deciding who would stay and who would go, as well as who would join the FG, was left undetermined, and it was agreed that this would be discussed and decided at the in-person Annual Assembly. So, at the 2018 Annual Assembly in La Bergerie, attendees split into groups and worked on different ideas for the process of renewing the FG: lottery system, online voting, current FG choose etc. Once these processes were fleshed out, the Assembly attendees voted, and the most-favoured idea was the one where a panel - comprised of FG members and randomly assigned members - would review nominations to make the final decision.

First mistake

Therefore in the summer of 2018 two FG members (ones who had decided they wanted to leave) plus three randomly selected 'normal' members reviewed the nominations gathered on the platform, and chose the new people to join the FG, as well as the those who would leave. This process was a success, but no paper-trail was left of how this process worked (timeline, assessment criteria, decision-making process etc.). This was the first mistake: when the process was run again in 2019, everything started again from scratch without any guidance or reference as to what had previously worked or not.

Second mistake

The new FG group then worked together from June 2018, although they didn't meet in-person until October 2018. The October 2018 meeting was so useful that it was decided that the following year the FG should be selected in time for the Annual Assembly, so that they could meet in-person as soon as possible. This was the second mistake of the 2019 process: when we (the FG) decided that we should run the process prior to the Assembly,

¹This blog has been written by Rose, a member of the 2017/18/19 Facilitation Group. When I say 'we', I am usually referring the broad FundAction community, but sometimes I'll be referring the FG, in which case I'll note that.

we somehow forgot the enormous amount of work involved in setting up the Assembly, and also that we run our major grant process (Renew) in the lead-up to the Assembly too. We knew from experience that this period would be incredibly busy (we had been working non-stop when we ran Renew and built up to the Assembly in 2018), so we really shouldn't have added another major process in to the mix, but hey - we're here to change the world. In the end, this meant that FundAction was running our three most complicated and time-consuming processes all at the same time.

Third mistake

These three months were marked by some FG members being unable to support the collective for various reasons, which meant that a few FG members picked up their activities. This was the third mistake: individuals who were already responsible for major areas of FundAction's work were then also running the FG Renewal process alongside these. This aspect was compounded by a fundraising drive that was run alongside the Assembly; we needed funds, and thought the Assembly was a good opportunity to reach out to new donors, so we orchestrated our first fundraising campaign alongside the Renew grant process, the renewal of the FG, and the preparation for the Assembly.

In some aspects of FundAction's operations, it's clear who is the lead, but in the case of the FG renewal process, bits-and-pieces of it were picked up by different FG members. Tasks are rarely distributed formally in an equitable way, but rather folks volunteer to support things as we go along. In this case, three FG members stepped in to manage various aspects of the FG renewal process. Here is another mistake to learn from: we had no formal, documented process to follow (which we have developed for our grant processes), nor was there a formal working group focussing on this issue (which is how we develop our Annual Assembly planning). So, one person offered to manage the several aspects of the process in-between all their other responsibilities, and one aspect of this was the random selection of panel members.

Fourth mistake

The random selection of panel members was undertaken using a list of members that had been generated via an algorithm that takes into account gender and geography. The FG emailed the top five people in the list; if they said 'no', the next five were emailed, and so on, until three people had accepted the task. This is where our fourth mistake lay: we assumed that this process was 'fair', but the reality was that using this process resulted in an imbalanced panel: four of the five panel members were women, and three of the five live in the same city. This was noted at the time by the FG, but we didn't feel we should intervene because a.) we were following the supposedly-fair 'random' process, and b.) it had taken us so long to even get these people to accept, we were behind on our deadline.

Fifth mistake

The panel of five then gathered on an email thread to begin the process of reviewing the nominations. This is where two major mistakes came in. The fifth major mistake was that we

(the panel for renewing the FG) didn't have an agreed way that we would review the nominees, nor a process for decision-making. So, some of us prioritised geographical diversity or access to new networks; others felt that the skills people had stated they offered were more important. We didn't know how we would hold our deliberations, nor whether we would make decisions via consensus, voting. This meant that not only was it not really clear what we were trying to achieve or how, we wasted a lot of time discussing these various things rather than following whatever had been tried-and-tested the previous year - time that we didn't have, because the period allocated to the process had been truncated, and because the deadline for the Assembly was looming. Particularly for those of us concerned about FundAction's finances, the pressure of swiftly booking travel for the new FG to join the Assembly was strong.

Sixth mistake

The sixth major mistake was simply a massive oversight and miscommunication. The nominees who had not nominated themselves (and had therefore not completed the information about their skills, interests and experiences) were informed that the panel would be in touch to ask them to provide this information. The panel, however, didn't get round to this, as messages to one-another about organising something got lost in inbox chaos, so in the end nobody asked the nominees to provide anything. This meant a massive imbalance between some nominees and others. Some nominees had submitted a lot of information, and were well-known to the panel, which made it easy to discuss what their skills and interests. For the others, we reviewed their profiles on the platform, and the information their nominators said about them, but that was all.

The process that renewal panel undertook was not planned in advance, but had several stages over just under two weeks. We spoke via email, found a time to talk, but in the end one of us was forced to miss the meeting. Prior to the meeting we read all the information and consulted everyone's profiles on the platform. We spoke at length about who we thought would make good FG members, and what we thought was important to consider. We removed a couple we agreed weren't suitable (because they hadn't said they were interested, for example.) These discussions were all noted down - though it's important to say that we didn't all agree on everything. The missing panel member then added their points to the document, and we had more email discussions. The list was narrowed, from 15 to 6, and we had further discussions before voting. The votes weren't ranked, but they were anonymous. This voting process proposed one person, but there was a tie between three others, so we had a second vote just on those people, which resulted in the final group.

Seventh mistake

This process was quite thorough and 'fair', but doesn't take into account many things. As mentioned, we didn't have a balanced panel, we didn't have the same amount of information on each person, and we didn't have an agreed criteria for what we were prioritising. On top of this, we also didn't have a way to consider people's previous relationships with nominees - should we include our personal perspectives, or not? - and we didn't have a way to consider what the needs are for FundAction at this time. This is another mistake: the FG members

leaving are responsible for (amongst other things) communications, fundraising and finance. Very few of the nominees mentioned any of these aspects in their profiles. This doesn't mean they're not interested in these areas but rather that we didn't know, because we didn't ask them. People talked about why they were committed to FundAction as a political project, not whether they were good with spreadsheets.

The thinking here was two-fold: Firstly, this is not a 'job', and this wasn't a job interview process, where we 'match candidates to the right position' or something. Secondly, we've never really outlined what skills or expertise FundAction needs in the past, or may need in the future. However, it's obvious now that a.) being on the FG isn't a job, but it is a paid position of responsibility, and b.) we probably should know what tasks are needed to run FundAction, and not just rely on the enthusiasm of people volunteering to take different ideas forward. These, obviously, are much bigger issues than the FG renewal process challenges. And this leads to the next part of the process.

The renewal panel convened once again to decide what we were going to communicate with nominees. We all sent bullet points of why we made our personal decisions, and those bullets that were shared were sent to nominees (both those who were chosen and those who weren't.) These included five points, including geographic/gender diversity, and that people who seem motivated, particularly those nominated by themselves as well as others, were prioritised. Once we communicated to the nominees the outcome of the decisions (done by another FG member), one of the nominees responded with a really thoughtful but challenging email. They highlighted the issue that they had never been asked to submit any information about themselves, and asked how we could possibly gauge their interest in FundAction without it.

This email was the start of a BIG review process. The FG member who received it sent it to the whole FG, and it prompted a giant conversation. For me, at least, the email was the trigger, articulating so many things I'd found uncomfortable. After an FG meeting, we decided to set up a call with those who were nominated but not chosen, to ask them how they were feeling, to explain things and see if they wanted to veto the process.

Another mistake - or simply some confusion...

And this is where another mistake came in, though it was less a mistake and more a total confusion. A 'veto' process had been put into the platform, though none of us were sure who authored it or when it was decided that it should be there. To cut a long story short, we eventually found out that this had been proposed by someone in the old FG, but the decision had been made that it wasn't going to be part of the process, yet somehow the wording had made its way on the platform and in 2019 we posted it as part of the process, despite none of us understanding it or feeling it was in any way useful or even implementable. (It required dissenters to get 25% of the platform to vote against the decision, which would mean more than 50 people, which is ridiculous as only around 40 people even vote on proposals.) As with the 'random' panel, this is another example of us following what we believed to be the 'fair' process, even if the outcome doesn't match what we as humans feel aligns with our values or purpose.

The call was held, with five members joining, plus three FG members (including one who hadn't been involved in any aspect of the FG renewal up to this point, but who is just really interested in deliberative democratic process). Clarification questions were answered, challenges were discussed, and a whole catalogue of issues (including those detailed above) were documented. As a result of this 90 minute long call, nobody wanted to 'veto' the process, but everyone felt it wasn't doing us justice to simply go ahead with the decision without more thought.

So, the decision was taken to 'pause' the process, and bring the issue to the Annual Assembly, where FundAction members gather for governance and community-building. A second meeting was then held with those people who were chosen as new FG members to update them on this 'pause', during which two of seemed intrigued by the process but one seemed really disappointed. A third and final meeting was then held with the renewal panel, who were also disappointed of the 'pausing' yet respectful of the need to take this challenge seriously. All three meetings were thoroughly documented, to avoid the same problems happening next time. These conversations led to a proposal for the Assembly meeting: Option 1 - start the process again. Option 2 - move forward with the decision, but review and change for next time.

8 mistakes: how to fix them?

A session on the issue was proposed for the Assembly, and a group convened during the Assembly in La Bergerie to discuss what to do. That group came up with an 'alternative' FG renewal process (basically, a more detailed and careful version of what we'd used, implemented properly, with the new FG starting in September), which they presented in plenary. They suggested that the whole platform now votes on whether to go with this 'new' process, or to go with the outcomes of the previous panel decision but with the promise of a review for next year. However there were so many questions from Assembly attendees on different aspects of the proposal, as well as questions about what had happened previously, that it was decided that another session needed to be held, dedicated to this discussion.

It was during this session that the timbre of the discussion changed somewhat. It was pointed out that this is an emotional process that impacts on humans and shouldn't solely be treated as a bureaucratic process that can be fixed via technocratic tweaks to the process. For the first time, the notion of people unfamiliar with the whole process (those who had not been party to these long, complicated discussions, who perhaps may not even have known this process was happening, let alone be impacted by it) voting at the Assembly or online with limited information in a short timeframe was questioned - isn't the whole point of participatory grantmaking that those who are most affected by the outcome are centred in decision-making?

The second lengthy discussion on this issue at the Assembly included a core group of 6 people, with about 8 others joining and offering insight at various points, with all discussions taking part in a straw poll to decide on the final recommendation. This conversation focussed

on the impact of the decisions on those involved. For the first time, it was noted that should we decide to start the whole process again, this would disproportionately burden the three members of the FG who were supposed to be leaving - people who had already expressed some burnout and exhaustion. The FG members involved also noted that although they felt guilty about how the process was unfair to those nominated but not chosen due to insufficient information, they have an additional burden of guilt towards those who were told that they had been chosen but then not confirmed, guilt that would be increased were we to start the process all over again. These additional demands need to be accounted for if we wish to be a caring organisation, and if we wish for 'fairness' to manifest in how we work together - distributing tasks, supporting one-another, recognising people's need for a break. (Afterwards, one of the new FG members pointed out that care, and putting people first, is what makes the difference between us and the extractive organisations we were established as an alternative to.)

Many questions were raised during this and other discussions on the FG at the Annual Assembly. This includes how we evaluate the functioning of the FG - a governance structure that was established before FundAction even began, and perhaps needs rethinking. Another point was how the process can hold transparency and accountability (core values) without mimicking the corporate culture of many NGOs - formal job descriptions, performance reviews etc. The notion of the veto was scrutinised at length, and it was decided it served no purpose, because the ultimate aim of the veto - to allow 'normal' members to intervene in the process and decision-making - is better served through other mechanisms. We talked about whether prioritising those who had multiple recommendations turns the process into a popularity contest (which we agreed it could, although that was not necessarily the case in this instance.) We talked about power dynamics, inherent in everything we do and yet not openly recognised at any point of this process. These issues - governance, transparency, power and privilege - are relevant to much of FundAction's work, and the discussions held on the FG renewal offer rich thinking into future aspects of FundAction operation.

In conclusion, the following points were agreed:

1. We would 'press play' on the outcomes of the decision of the Renewal panel, to allow old FG members to leave and new FG members to join.
2. We would speak to all those affected by the process to outline in detail the discussions and decisions, and document and communicate the process for all members.
3. The new FG is requested to do a full review of the FG process as a matter of priority, to propose a new, clear process for next time, including a review of the FG functioning.
4. The 2019 process would include a proper handover for the new FG, to allow some overlap, support and learning for the whole FG.
5. We agree that in future, 'random selection' would include some FG intervention to ensure that the outcomes fit with our vision of diversity / randomness.

The key, overarching takeaways of these specific actions are outlined in the bulletpoints at the top of this piece. But my takeaways are two-fold:

- We can't rely on technology to be the holders of democracy in our processes, and we can't simply trust that processes that were assumed to be fair in design will necessarily result in fair outcomes when they're implemented. Human intervention is essential to ensure that our aims of democracy and fairness are actually being met. This requires a strong power analysis (which leads to my next point).
- We need to consider the human costs of our processes, and establish a system that cares for the humans involved in making these processes happen. Rather than championing processes that promote transparency and efficiency but place a heavy burden on those who are mandated to implement them, we need to equitably share tasks in a way that reflects our capacity rather than our ambitions. (Jo Freeman's [Tyranny of Structurelessness](#) comes to mind).

This blog is a step towards acknowledging the human hurt caused during the 2019 FG renewal, as well as a step towards being accountable and transparent in acknowledging our mistakes. We now need to review and propose a new process that responds to the issues raised.

I wanted to end this piece by thanking a few people. I'd like to thank everyone involved in the whole process, especially those who volunteered for the FG renewal panel, those who participated so fully in the discussions about this during the Assembly, and those who challenged the process and set this whole conversation in motion. Most of all I'd like to thank Nico and Lucas, the two FG members who supported this review most heavily. For me personally, Nico turned this from quite a stressful, distressing experience into a lesson in participatory approaches via his boundless enthusiasm for reflection and learning. And particular thanks to Lucas, who has achieved miracles and taken on an enormous burden of emotional labour over the previous months. (Lucas is perhaps the person most impacted by the FG's task-allocation system: '*Whoever volunteers ends up doing it*' is a shit way of running things, as it's always Lucas who volunteers.) It's been a pleasure working so closely with them and all the other members of FundAction's FG over the past two years - thank you!