Cross-Border Grant Making by Private Foundations

By Jane Peebles, JD

Charitable gifts by Americans to fund projects abroad have increased dramatically in the past decade, yet many U.S. donors, foundation directors, and their advisors are unaware of the complex tax rules that govern such gifts.

The Basic Rules
A U.S. citizen or resident who makes a direct donation to a foreign charity is not entitled to an income tax deduction for that gift. However, if the funds are donated to a charity that was created or organized in the United States, and which then uses the donation to fund a charitable project abroad, the donation is deductible. The U.S. charity must retain discretion and control over the use of the funds, and the funds must be put to uses recognized as charitable under U.S. tax laws. A gift to a U.S. charity for use abroad may be made through a "friends of" organization, community foundation, or other U.S. public charity, or through a U.S. private foundation.

Donations via "friends of" organizations. Contributions also may be made to a U.S. public charity formed to support a foreign charity or charities. A U.S. donor who wishes to benefit Oxford University in England, for example, can make a donation to the "American Friends of Oxford University," a U.S. charity formed for this purpose. The "friends of" organization monitors the use of the funds, so the gift is deductible.

Donations via community foundations. A U.S. donor also can claim a deduction for a gift to a community foundation which, in turn, regrants the funds to a foreign charity. The community foundation’s governing documents and internal policies must allow it to make grants abroad and it must not act as a mere conduit for the gift.

Donations via private foundations. The donor’s own private foundation also can make grants to foreign charities. The private foundation must retain discretion and control over the use of the funds and follow procedures to ensure the funds are used only to further its own charitable purposes.

Rules Applicable to U.S. Private Foundations Making Grants Abroad
U.S. private nonoperating foundations making grants abroad will want to determine whether the grants count as "qualifying distributions" that satisfy their required 5-percent annual payout under Section 4942 of the Internal Revenue Code (IRC). A foundation grant to a foreign charity is a qualifying distribution if it is made for charitable purposes recognized by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and 1) the grant is to a foreign charity that would qualify as a public charity if it had been established here; 2) the grant is to a foreign charity that is the equivalent of a U.S. private foundation, and the U.S. foundation making the grant exercises "expenditure responsibility" with respect to the grant; or 3) the foreign entity is not the equivalent of a U.S. charity but agrees to segregate the grant funds in a separate account, use them only for charitable purposes as defined by IRC Section 170(c), and account to the U.S. foundation regarding its use of the funds.

Foreign charities with U.S. exempt status. A foreign charity that is the equivalent of a U.S. public charity can apply for and obtain U.S. tax-exempt status. Few foreign charities bother to do this because U.S. individual donors still are not entitled to deduct direct contributions to them. If a foreign charity is granted U.S. tax-exempt status, a grant to it by a U.S. private foundation always counts toward the foundation’s 5-percent annual payout.

Good faith determination. If the foreign charity does not have U.S. tax-exempt status, the private foundation can collect data to determine whether it is the equivalent of a U.S. public charity. If the foundation can make a "good faith determination" that the foreign charity meets the requirements for U.S. public charity status, the grant to it will be a qualifying distribution. In attempting to make an equivalency determination, the private foundation may rely on information provided in an opinion from its own counsel or the foreign charity’s counsel, but the cost of obtaining an opinion may be prohibitive for smaller foundations.
In Revenue Procedure 92-94, 1992-2 C.B. 507, the IRS approved a form of affidavit of the foreign grantee that can be relied upon by multiple U.S. foundations. This helps small foundations make their equivalency determinations at a reasonable cost.

**Expenditure responsibility.** It is often impossible to determine that the foreign charity is equivalent to a U.S. public charity. Particularly with smaller charities in developing or underdeveloped nations, the proposed grantee may not keep adequate financial records for a U.S. funder to determine whether it meets the one-third public support test that applies to public charities other than churches, schools, and hospitals. In many cases, the foreign charity may have adequate records but may receive its funding from too narrow a base of donors to meet the one-third public support test. In such cases, the grant still can be made, but the U.S. foundation must exercise “expenditure responsibility” over the grant funds. Exercising expenditure responsibility maximizes the odds that the funds will be used for U.S. charitable purposes because the U.S. foundation closely monitors the use of the funds.

The U.S. foundation must make all reasonable efforts to see that the grant is spent solely for the purposes for which it was made. Exercising expenditure responsibility entails making a pre-grant inquiry to allow the grantor to determine whether the proposed foreign grantee can fulfill the charitable purpose of the grant. An officer or director of the foreign grantee also must sign a written grant agreement specifying the charitable purpose of the grant and committing the grantee to: 1) repay any funds not used for the grant’s purpose; 2) submit annual reports detailing how the funds have been used, compliance with the grant agreement, and the grantee’s progress in achieving the purpose for which the grant was made; 3) maintain books and records that are available to the grantor; and 4) separately account for the grant funds or, if the foreign grantee is not the equivalent of a U.S. nonprofit (e.g., it is for-profit or an entity such as a trade group), then to maintain the grant funds in a separate account dedicated to one or more charitable purposes. The agreement typically also will prohibit the grantee from regranting the funds to other foreign organizations or individuals because that triggers additional complicated rules to minimize the likelihood that the funds will be diverted from charitable purposes. Expenditure responsibility grants are reported to the IRS on the U.S. foundation’s Form 990-PF.

A foreign government, or any agency or instrumentality thereof, is treated like a U.S. public charity. A grant to it counts toward the U.S. foundation’s 5-percent payout requirement as long as the gift is used for charitable purposes.

**Grants to governmental units.** Grants to foreign governmental units do not require either an equivalency determination or expenditure responsibility. A foreign government, or any agency or instrumentality thereof, is treated like a U.S. public charity. A grant to it counts toward the U.S. foundation’s 5-percent payout requirement as long as the gift is used for charitable purposes. The U.S. foundation’s file should contain documentation establishing that the grantee is a foreign government or governmental unit and a copy of its grant letter specifying the charitable purpose of the grant.

**The out of corpus requirement.** If the foreign charity grantee is the equivalent of a U.S. private foundation, the U.S. foundation’s expenditure responsibility grant to it also must meet the “out of corpus” requirement. A grant from one private foundation to another will not count toward the U.S. foundation’s 5-percent annual payout unless the grantee satisfies the “out of corpus” rule. The “out of corpus” rule generally requires that any grant from one private foundation to another must be spent by the grantee within 12 months after the close of the tax year in which it received the funds. This policy is designed to ensure that such grants will be used to benefit the public and not to build the grantee’s investment portfolio. Additional complex restrictions govern the “out of corpus” rule.

**Anti-Terrorism Financing Guidelines**

U.S. private foundations also should be aware of the potential for criminal prosecution, civil penalties, and the freezing of their assets if they are found to have made contributions to foreign or domestic charities that engage in or support terrorism.

**Executive Order 13224 and the Patriot Act.** Very soon after the terrorist attacks of 9/11/01, President Bush issued Executive Order 13224, “Blocking Property and Prohibiting Transactions with Persons Who Commit, Threaten to Commit, or Support Terrorism” (the “Executive Order”). One month later, the USA PATRIOT Act was signed into law.
The executive order provides a means to disrupt the financial support network for terrorists and terrorist organizations by authorizing the U.S. government to block the assets of foreign individuals and entities that commit, or pose a significant risk of committing, acts of terrorism. It also authorizes the government to block the assets of individuals and entities that provide support, services, or assistance to, or otherwise associate with, terrorists and terrorist organizations. Any transaction involving persons or entities designated under the order, “including but not limited to the making or receiving of contributions of funds, goods, or services,” is prohibited.

Once an entity or individual is designated under the executive order, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the Treasury Department blocks the assets of the individual or entity in the United States and adds the individual or entity to its list of “Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons.” Executive Order 13224 does not require knowledge or intent; making a contribution to a designated entity may subject the U.S. private foundation to sanctions even though it did not intend to support terrorism and did not know that the grant would be used for such purposes.

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The “financing of terrorism” can result in substantial civil penalties or prison terms of up to 20 years, or both, if a person willfully provides or collects funds with the intention that such funds be used to carry out acts of terrorism or to support a foreign terrorist organization. OFAC’s list of “Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons” includes organizations that have been designated as foreign terrorist organizations and individuals determined to have connection to terrorist groups. The list is available at www.ustreas.gov/offices/enforcement/ofac/sdn/, and every potential grantee, as well as its individual directors, should be checked against the OFAC list before a U.S. foundation makes a grant to it.

Treasury Department’s anti-terrorism best practices. In November 2002, the Treasury Department issued “Anti-Terrorist Financing Guidelines: Voluntary Best Practices for U.S.-Based Charities.” The guidelines, which have now been revised several times, are available at www.ustreas.gov/press/releases/reports/0929finalrevised.pdf. According to the press release announcing the issuance of the guidelines, if a U.S.-based charity follows the voluntary guidelines, “there will be a corresponding reduction in the likelihood of a blocking order against any such charity or donors who contribute to such charity in good faith, absent knowledge or intent to provide financing or support to terrorist organizations.” In addition to containing certain standard suggestions for organizational transparency, the guidelines provide for U.S. organizations to perform significant due diligence prior to distributing funds to foreign organizations.

Charitable organizations have expressed dissatisfaction with the guidelines for failing to take into account existing laws requiring oversight of foreign grants and the experience of U.S. grant-makers in making such grants, adopting a one-size-fits-all approach, for being so broadly and vaguely worded that compliance is costly and difficult—if not impossible—to achieve. In response, representatives of more than 25 U.S. charities, in cooperation with the Treasury Department, worked to develop a more usable alternative to the guidelines. The new alternatives were released in March 2005, in a document entitled “Principles of International Charity,” with the hope that they will replace the Treasury Department’s voluntary guidelines. This document, which is thoughtful and pragmatic, is available at www.usig.org/pdfs/principles_final.pdf.

Best practices under the anti-terrorist financing guidelines. Most contributions to foreign charitable organizations have little risk of being diverted to support terrorism because they are made to well-known and reputable foreign charities. Nevertheless, foundations engaged in international philanthropy routinely should assess the risk of such a diversion and adopt and follow policies and procedures so as not to inadvertently run afoul of the anti-terrorist financing rules. The policies and procedures will vary depending on the nature of the particular grant and donee organization. When making grants to foreign charities, particularly if the proposed foreign donee is not a well-established charity, the U.S. private foundation should:

• Check the OFAC list of “Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons.” There are computer

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programs that allow one to do this efficiently, though false positives are a problem.

• Conduct due diligence to ensure that the proposed foreign donee is a bona fide charitable organization.
• Assess the likelihood of diversion based on the grantee and the circumstances.
• Manage the risk by taking steps most likely to prevent diversion, such as by disbursing funds in installments on receipt of the grantee’s financial and progress reports and/or its track record using previously granted funds and/or using a reliable individual in the foreign jurisdiction to help administer and monitor the grant.
• Keep good records of the foundation’s due diligence, grant procedures, and risk assessments.

Closing Thoughts
The private foundation that seeks to avoid dealing with the stringent requirements applicable to direct grants abroad may choose instead to make its grant to a U.S. public charity that will use the funds to support a charitable project overseas. This is common for smaller foundations, which lack the staff to process direct overseas grants and the funds to have consultants to guide them in making such grants.

Even if a U.S. private foundation is able to clear all of the hurdles described in this article, it still will need sufficient capacity to exercise the required ongoing oversight of grants for use abroad to foreign entities that do not have IRS determination letters or are simply not equivalent to U.S. public charities. Grantors can become quite frustrated chasing financial reports and other follow-up data needed for expenditure responsibility grants. It is therefore critical that such foundations have knowledgeable legal counsel and other advisors.

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Additional Resources


Chomicz, Thomas. 1998. Grantmaking by Private Foundations in the International Programs that Allow One to Do This Efficiently, Though False Positives Are a Problem.