

HOW EFFECTIVE IS THE PROGRAM'S IMPACT FUND?

Introduction

Since 2019, through the Impact Fund, the program has been disbursing small project-based grants to partner organisations to address emerging needs in their communities.

From December 2022 to March 2023, the program worked with research consultants to review two rounds of the Impact Fund to determine what outcomes had been achieved by Impact Fund recipients, and what partner organisations have gained through engagement with the grants program.

The evaluation followed on from a previous review of the systems and processes of the Impact Fund conducted by external consultants in February 2022, as well as an internal review of the outcomes of the Impact Fund Round 2: COVID-19 Response and Recovery, conducted by the MEL team.

Methodology

The evaluation involved the collection and analysis of primary and secondary data to address the evaluation objectives.

Primary data was collected through virtual interviews with representatives from 15 partner organisations, which were sampled to ensure adequate representation. The interviews provided insight into the recipients' experience with the Impact Fund and were used to create individual case studies.

Secondary data was collected through a review of grant documents of 35 Impact Fund recipients, comprising the 15 recipients interviewed, plus 20 more selected by the program. Analysis of this larger data set was used to draw broader conclusions about, and recommendations for, the Impact Fund, in response to the evaluation objectives.

Key Findings

The review found:

- **Impact Fund grants were often used by partner organisations to expand their existing work and enhance organisational or program effectiveness** by funding necessary materials and equipment and enabling greater reach into more remote communities. Many partner organisations noted that their projects could not have proceeded in part, or total, without the grant funding, and that the Impact Fund presented the opportunity to purchase items and develop systems which other donors would generally not invest in.

Without the grants, our dream of getting our country in the Brisbane Olympics would not be possible. We've been working here for 17 years, but it hasn't really kicked off. Now with the grants, we can build. Without the funding, we couldn't get necessary resources and have the ability to travel.

- Grant recipient

- **Impact Fund grants were commonly used by partner organisations to develop new programs and or projects.** The delivery of new or expanded activities under Impact Fund grants often led to increased capacity development of partner organisation staff, achieved both as a by-product of project delivery and through formal training opportunities. Supported activities allowed staff to further develop their personal skills and experience in a variety of areas, and enhanced the collective capacity of their organisations.
- **Partner organisations had enhanced their program delivery, grant writing and reporting skills through engagement with the Impact Fund.** Many partner organisations benefitted from the role of a current or former Australian volunteer, and or, the in-country team, who assisted them in thinking differently and more deeply, developing their skills and confidence in program management and delivery, grant writing and reporting, and increased their confidence to seek other grants.

It was a bit tricky at first, in terms of having to align our project to the requirements laid out [around gender equity]. It was good though. There were some things I really had to think about in depth. I never really associated waste management with inclusion or thought about what different groups might need.

- Grant recipient

- **Numerous Impact Fund projects focused on the capacity development of local communities**, which increased education and employment opportunities, promoted economic empowerment, and positively contributed to financial and food security. Several projects focused on awareness and advocacy work, enabling partner organisations to reach wider audiences. Others involved networking activities or the creation of support groups, which directly created opportunities for employment, knowledge sharing, and economic empowerment.

We've always lacked data to conduct research, but now thanks to this grant, we have our own data on our own communities on which we can conduct research.

- Grant recipient

- **The main barrier to applying for a grant was lack of awareness about the Impact Fund opportunity, or open rounds.** It was noted that in-country teams worked to mitigate this by ensuring their partner organisation networks were aware of Impact Fund rounds and supported in the application process.
- **Overall, the Impact Fund application process was perceived as flexible, fast, straightforward, user-friendly, and not too onerous**, with many recipients noting they had, or were intending to, apply for subsequent Impact Fund grants. The positive relationship with the program, particularly with in-country teams, was considered a strength and enabled partner organisations to seek additional advice or request extensions or variations when needed, which many believed led to effective and high impact use of the funds.

We are so appreciative of this grant system because it's very accessible, very easy to report on and has a lot of impact for us as NGOs. I can only express my gratitude to the Australian Volunteers Program that they provide this type of support to us.

- Grant recipient

Recommendations

The review provided several recommendations as to how the program could improve the effectiveness of the Impact Fund, including:

- Adapting forms and guidance to improve understanding, for example, including clarifying guidance and criteria around eligibility and sustainability.
- Providing additional support resources for applicants, including facilitating forums to enable shared learning around grant writing.
- Increasing accessibility of the application process by providing access to funds to cover the costs of translation or enabling applicants to submit applications in their local language.
- Conducting further review into the promotion and marketing of the Impact Fund.

The review noted that given the evaluation was focused on historical rounds of the Impact Fund – which took place in 2021 – that the Impact Fund team had since made improvements to the design and accessibility of the grants program, including hosting additional grant writing webinars featuring previous recipients, producing a grant writing video series in four languages, expanding guidance around sustainability and eligibility, providing funding for translations, and ensuring funding rounds are advertised to all partner organisations.

Oh, beauty, this is something we can apply for! We're always looking for grants. We're always looking for support sponsors. And the easier the grant is to fill out and the less paperwork, the more attractive.

- Grant recipient

Next steps

The program warmly welcomes the findings and recommendations of the review. The Impact Fund continues to be a key mechanism for the Australian Volunteers Program, and the findings of the review will be used to make improvements to the grants program to enhance outcomes and improve accessibility for partner organisations.

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