

## **Guidelines for Operating Small Grant and Technical Assistance Funds in the Caribbean**

These guidelines are intended to help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of organisations operating small grant/technical assistance funds in the Caribbean. The recommendations in this document are based on the experience of the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute (CANARI) in operating a small grant/technical assistance fund, and draw on lessons learned from a review of that facility, which was conducted in 1995.

The CANARI Small Grants Fund was established in 1991 to support projects that aim to increase community participation in natural resource management. The Fund provides grants of up to \$2,500 to community-based organisations (CBOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and government agencies. The review was designed to identify the main reasons for the low level of response to the CANARI Small Grants Fund during its first four years of operation. The review included surveys of the various target groups, notably selected government agencies and NGOs that had received grant announcements in the past, and CBOs in Grenada. Representatives of four organisations with experience in operating small grant programmes in the region--the Caribbean Council of Churches (CCC), the Caribbean Network for Integrated Rural Development (CNIRD), Island Resources Foundation (IRF) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)--were also interviewed as part of the exercise.

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### ***GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS***

One of the benefits of small grant and technical assistance funds is that they have the ability to be flexible in their response to the needs of the target audience. They are attractive because they tend to be easily accessed, and provide small-scale project specific support. Small grant and technical assistance programmes should be designed to minimize bureaucracy and red tape in all phases of operation and should allow for flexibility in meeting the needs of the target audience.

The efficient and effective operation of a small grant programme is generally a labour intensive undertaking. It is therefore important for such facilities to be fully integrated into the programme of the operating or "donor" organisation, supporting its mission, and complementing other projects. Small grant programmes should be subject to the same rigour as other activities and should maximize benefits from other activities.

Small grant facilities are intended to meet a perceived need. Operating organisations should have a sound understanding of the actual needs and priorities of the target audience, and not create

situations where funding priorities are donor-driven.

The experience of some organisations operating small grant funds in the Caribbean suggests that offering a combination of support for projects and institutional capacity building is most effective. Organisations that have offered one type of support, but not the other, have cited this as a weakness of their programmes and indicate that there is a need for combining the two.

## ***IDENTIFYING AND REACHING THE TARGET AUDIENCE***

The success of any small grant facility hinges on several things, including the ability of the operating organisation to reach the group or audience the fund is intended to benefit. It is important to clearly identify the target audience and assess how it gets information. Most groups get their information in a variety of ways, including via the mass media, from newsletters/magazines, by word of mouth, and through networks of like-minded groups or organisations. The CANARI review revealed that incorrect assumptions about the extent to which organisations share information and about the ways in which certain members of its target audience get information led to limited, and sometimes inappropriate, dissemination of information about the fund.

It is incorrect to assume that the strategy for reaching one group or audience will work for another. Many community-based organisations, for example, are not part of formal networks, so information distributed to NGOs and NGO networks may not necessarily reach them; nor would information sent to relevant government agencies, as many of these organizations are not registered and therefore are not recognised by the government. To effectively spread messages, it is essential to identify those channels of communication that the target audience taps into and recognises as reliable and authoritative. In CANARI's experience, an effective strategy for disseminating information about its fund is one which uses a range of targeted entry points for reaching the intended audience. These include direct mailing to a variety of individuals and organisations, the publication of announcements in newsletters and magazines, and the use of the mass media to publicise projects funded under CANARI's programme, in order to build general awareness of the Fund.

As important as identifying the audience and figuring out how to reach it, is communicating information about the fund. The language and format must be appropriate to the target audience. The language and format used for a small grant fund targeting scientific researchers would differ significantly from a fund targeting local community development organisations. Any written information about the fund should use language and terminology that are specific, clear and unambiguous. The use of jargon and poorly understood terms should be avoided. Attention should also be paid to how the information is presented. Flyers and announcements compete with other pieces of paper for the reader's attention. The format should therefore strive to capture the reader's interest, without being too busy or confusing.

## ***WORKING WITH THE TARGET AUDIENCE***

In designing programmes, “donor” organisations should be mindful of the operational constraints that might affect the target audience’s ability to access funds. Community-based organisations, for example, tend to have small staffs and to depend on volunteers. This may affect their ability to prepare proposals and implement projects that require the disbursement of funds. Community organizations are also often affected by the fact that community members must first satisfy their own financial needs. Community institutions are sometimes poorly developed, lacking in systems to function efficiently. Any small grants programme that targets CBOs ought to take these issues into account.

The application process should be simple and straightforward, as should be requirements for reporting and impact evaluation. The use of simple forms for applications and progress reports is one way in which CANARI has addressed the issue of operational constraints. The use of forms is a practical strategy for almost any audience; forms simplify application and reporting procedures, and help facilitate the swift preparation of information, if only because the prospect of answering specific questions is less daunting than the idea of preparing a proposal or report. Other organisations in the region have also used forms with good results.

Small grant funds, particularly when they target community-based organisations, provide opportunities for developing the institutional capacity of the recipient organisation. The application procedure, for example, may be used as a capacity-building exercise when working with groups or organisations with limited experience in soliciting funds from donors.

## ***MONITORING AND EVALUATION***

One strategy for helping to ensure programme success is to maintain contact with recipient organisations during the project. In this way, the donor organisation is able to track the progress of the project and provide midstream assistance or advice, if necessary. When working with small and young organisations, input during the course of the project can prove to be invaluable.

CANARI uses progress reports to get information during the project period, and in so far as is possible, project staff visit grant recipients on site.

The review of CANARI’s fund revealed that one of the main weaknesses of small grant programmes in general is lack of follow-up. The importance of follow-up was highlighted in the survey of CBOs in Grenada and is supported by the experiences of other organizations operating small grants projects. While no operating organisation wishes to create a dependency situation, all wish to make a sound investment with their monies. Building follow-up mechanisms into small grant facilities is one way in which operating organisations can work to ensure that grants are catalytic. Follow-up activities can take the form of direct technical assistance to the recipient

organisation, including assistance in project design, or help with the identification of other sources of funds or materials. Follow-up is not a guarantee for the medium to long term success of projects, which have received funding, but is a mechanism which may help.

All projects funded should be evaluated upon completion to ascertain the extent to which they have met their stated goals and objectives, to assess the potential and impact of unanticipated outcomes, and to determine the efficiency and effectiveness of project administration. Lessons learned from individual project evaluations should constantly feed into the overall operations of the fund. This process must be intentional if evaluations are to benefit programme design and delivery.

It is also important for donor organisations to periodically review their own experience in operating the fund, to evaluate levels of efficiency and effectiveness and to ensure that their own strategic goals in operating the fund are being met. As with any evaluation process, programme reviews allow for interventions to improve management and operations. The CANARI review led to a number of changes in the Institute's operation of the Small Grants Fund, changes which have already yielded positive results, particularly in the area of information dissemination.