

# Fostering Climate Resilience:

Lessons from flexible, community-based  
grantmaking in the Pacific Islands



GLOBAL GREENGRANTS FUND

Where change takes root

**How do grants help communities build climate resilience?** This was the pressing question Global Greengrants Fund examined in the Pacific Islands – a region that has much to teach the rest of the world. Locally-based advisors and grantees came together over a two-year period to review 43 grants distributed across Pacific Island communities in the period 2016-2018, to consider what could be learned from the grant support. Overall, they found that a flexible, community-based approach to funding, especially in the aftermath of cyclones, strengthened not only community infrastructure, but also strengthened relationships and processes – equally necessary foundations for resilience.

The question is of critical importance. Island communities are already experiencing dramatic changes due to climate change. Devastating cyclones and destabilized weather patterns bring both drought and flooding rainfall. Warming oceans and acidification alter fundamental ecological systems, changing how fishing communities interact with the sea. Higher tides, rising sea levels and related land loss undermine both croplands and housing foundations. These are just some of the issues that are challenging Pacific Island communities, and these are not just isolated incidents, for some changes represent permanent ecological shifts.

As pressing as these needs might be, local communities do not have many avenues to access funding. Most climate funding reaching the island nations comes in the form of large project grants given to national governments or capitol-based NGOs. Such funds do not always reach local jurisdictions or community groups attempting themselves to organize solutions. Operating in the Pacific since 2002, Global Greengrants Fund is one of the only consistent sources of small funds to community-based groups across the islands working on climate and environmental sustainability.

Going beyond short-term emergency response, people are looking to rebuild or replant in ways that anticipate the future and strengthen communities over the long-term. This study set out to identify specific lessons from current grantmaking to inform good practice in this climate-challenged environment.

## The Review Process

From 2016 to 2018, the Pacific Islands Advisory Board distributed a variety of small grants to community associations, indigenous groups, and NGOs – 12 grants in Micronesia, 14 grants in Vanuatu, and 17 grants across other Pacific Island countries. Over these two years, the advisors held various reflection events with grantee groups, made visits, and commissioned an independent study in Vanuatu, as well as short documentary video in Micronesia. The learning built over time in a “learn-as-you-go” manner, which allowed for relationship building and sharing analysis over time.

Drawing on an expansive set of applied research findings, the following definition guided the analysis:

**“Climate resilience is the ability of a system, community, or society to pursue its human, social, ecological, and economic objectives, while managing the impacts of climate change over time, in a way that is mutually reinforcing. Progress towards societal goals means better adapting and managing the risks of climate change, and vice versa.”<sup>1</sup>**

To what extent are current efforts that put resources directly in the hands of local communities enhancing long-term resiliency? How does community cohesion and cultural systems play a role in the grants and to what end? Immediate needs and relief assistance will no doubt always command attention; but can we leverage such responses to increase resilience?

1 The concept of disaster resilience has evolved over time through the work of many scholars and practitioners, including Adriana Keating et al., Operationalizing Resilience against Natural Disaster Risk: Opportunities, Barriers, and a Way Forward. Zurich Flood Resilience Alliance, 2014.

## Lessons Learned

Global Greengrants funding in the Pacific is truly reaching grassroots groups, including community based associations and networks. The study found that all 43 grants reached community based associations or small NGOs, some very remote, and for 40 percent the grant was the first ever received.

What lessons can we draw across a large and varied set of small, community-based grants? Together the advisors considered grants from many different angles, including social, human, ecological, and/or economic dimensions. They also discussed what marked results as more resilient over time (see box):

### Resilient systems are:

- **Robust – strong in quantity and/or quality**
- **Flexible – works in a variety of circumstances, or easily adjusted**
- **Redundant where needed, as well as diversified overall**
- **Resourceful and connected**
- **Able to learn and adjust**
- **Transparent and accountable**
- **Able to take information about the future into account**

**Four reinforcing elements of grantmaking stand out from this study:** First, communities know their own needs well, and when there is community ownership and buy-in for the proposal, the change can be long lasting. Second, investing in people and relationships is critical to both immediate and long-term success of any climate-smart investments. Third, granting through local advisors provides immeasurable technical and strategic support to the learning and connectedness of grantee communities. Finally, intentional learning and exchange should be built into grants, contributing to resiliency, and benefitting both communities and advisors.

**Resiliency may require community-led responses.** Immediate needs after a cyclone are often overwhelming. The study reinforced the importance of community-led action in making larger investments by governments and international aide more sustainable. Moreover, when local associations are part of recovery efforts, they learn valuable lessons that stay within the community.

**Farm Support Association, Vanuatu:** Soon after new bridges were built on the island of Tanna to replace those destroyed by an earlier cyclone, local community members realized that erosion would threaten the foundations. The building of the bridges had involved clearing the area around the bridges of all vegetation. Members of the local Farm Support Association, who called themselves **“Clean and Green Farming”** proposed an agricultural solution: the planting of vetiver grass to stabilize the soil around the bridges. Local farmers mobilized a demonstration garden and pursued partnerships with public works departments. By the time of the study, the demonstration gardens were successful and the association was in talks with several projects. In addition to the potential to make bridges more resilient to erosion, the project also served as a local demonstration of the value of vetiver in addressing other erosion and soil conservation concerns, and potentially created new partnerships for local farmers and laborers.

In the face of devastation, some of the grants supported the necessary rebuilding and rehabilitating of infrastructure, but in unique ways that improved their resiliency. Water supply, sanitation systems, community buildings, and the rehabilitation of watersheds and forests are the focus of local community concerns in a cross section of grants. The study showed the strong benefit of filling gaps where other kinds of emergency and humanitarian support could not: restoring important community investments, while setting up processes to maintain and rehabilitate them over time. In the interest of achieving greater climate resiliency, a basic objective is to ensure that major rebuilding projects include community-led initiatives, and their solutions around their long-term interests, should be a part of investments in recovery.



**Resiliency depends on people and relationships.** Recovery efforts offer an important, often over-looked opportunity to create lasting associations out of the spontaneous mobilization of local groups that happens in the face of disasters. There is a tremendous amount of goodwill and organizing between people after disasters, and strategic grantmaking, can be used to harness this good will into long-lasting civic associations. Successful grants depend upon and reinforce locally-based social capital.



**Insaed Long Karen Association, Vanuatu:**

The women of Port Vila were shocked by the effects of Cyclone Pam, which hit their community in 2015. Noting that official assistance was largely missing, neighbors came together to help each other, sharing food to meet immediate needs as well as seeds for replanting. Connections spread like a web across the area, especially woman to woman. The network eventually expanded to include 400 area women. Advisor Leah Nimoho, a founding member of the informal network, aided the process of more formal organization which gave the group access to grant funds and extended their voice in the international community as women of the Pacific Islands contending with the effects of climate change. Global Greengrants

funding supported intensive backyard vegetable gardening to increase food security – including training and purchase of seedlings, a water tank and planting equipment. Water shortages persist, but the process of organizing has connected the Association with other women’s support networks and funding sources.

Resiliency is served through a wide variety of relationship-building efforts. These include advancing the roles and interests of both older and younger members. Youth, especially young men, are often asked by their communities to do the clean up after a storm. With the lack of youth employment, this mobilization can be harnessed into civic youth associations that can partner with governments and relief aide for payment in the future, a goal of one of the grants in Micronesia. Several grants successfully supported cultural knowledge transfer and intergenerational learning. In one case grants were used by elders to use trees felled by storms as an opportunity to teach traditional canoe-building, using the grant to strengthen a rite of passage. Another grant supported independently governing tribal councils to set up natural resource committees to manage and rehabilitate land and territory with a clearer focus on climate change. All of these grants had successful elements that strengthened social cohesion and the ability to govern natural resources well.

**Advisors provide critical connections that make resiliency possible.** Advisors hold a key role in recommending, mentoring and connecting grantees. While local communities lead their own projects, advisors are well positioned to consolidate the efforts already underway, and build bridges that connect grantees with a broader set of expertise and resources.

**Entani Community Based Organization, Vanuatu:**

In the aftermath of Cyclone Pam, only three houses remained standing in Enkatalei, vegetation was wiped out, and their newly-constructed gravity-fed potable water system was nearly destroyed. Working together, villagers rebuilt their houses, but the water system and underlying watershed required more fundamental repair. The need for long-term resiliency planning was quickly apparent as the cyclone flooding was soon followed by drought. Local advisor Leah Nimoho was instrumental in connecting the community with the resources needed to assess and rehabilitate the watershed.



This included guiding the community through the grant funding process and hiring a Forestry Department botanist who used both local knowledge and science-based research to assess the options. Together, the botanist and community members decided how, where and which trees to plant to protect the water source, with an eye towards more storm resistance.

Advisors are environmental and social organizing professionals who live and work in the same countries where grantees are confronting their environmental and community challenges. For many Pacific Island grantees, grant support from Global Greengrants Fund is the very first outside assistance received for addressing their community goals. Having the support of a locally-based advisor who is both well-informed and well-connected puts new grantees on a strong footing.


Not all projects succeed in matching initial goals. However, advisors offer ongoing technical and strategic advice, which builds trust over time, and makes it more likely that solutions are found. Advisors might prioritize projects designed to sustain work that already exists, or choose to make multiple small grants that preserve progress made to date while allowing for adjustments based on experience and learning. Even as the rare project fails or becomes delayed, advisors continue to help grantees by recognizing what has been achieved and how to move forward.

**Intentional learning expands resiliency:** It is perhaps obvious to say that greater knowledge results from study and learning. What is not so obvious is how such learning relates to resiliency. Meetings and workshops offered opportunities for grantees to meet, share their work, learn from each other, and build local networks. Connecting in these ways was especially valuable for those grantees who otherwise could not afford intra-island travel. The learning period yielded equally important value for the advisors. Using a climate resilience framework throughout the learning period strengthened the mentoring of grantees; highlighted the importance of helping grantees to think about and enact long-term climate resiliency plans; and reinforced funding lessons, including prioritizing to sustain work that already exists.



- **Micronesia Learning Workshop 2017.** Grantees were brought together during an advisory board meeting on Micronesia's main island of Pohnpei to reflect on their work and efforts to achieve greater resilience. Numerous issues of mutual interest were identified. Grantees and advisors found that water catchment systems were a shared concern, providing opportunity for information exchange. The learning workshop also inspired discussion of how communities might better mobilize youth and cultivate their organizational capacity to achieve sustainable community goals.
- **Vanuatu Learning Workshop 2018.** Networking was the critical value for far-flung island groups who were brought together and found that they share similar objectives around community-led sustainable resource management and planning. Both grantees and advisors learned from each other on post-disaster resource recovery (such as community forest management strategies), as well as efforts to connect communities with government agencies and sustainable markets.

The Pacific Island experience shows that resilience is not a fixed goal. Rather, it is a process requiring the ability to learn, adjust, and incorporate risk and changing environments into decisions about the future. Increasingly, advisors are more directly helping grantees to think about and enact long-term climate resilience goals. Global Greengrants, with its flexible, rapid-response, community-based approach to funding, plays a critical role in that process.



*“It helps the communities to organize themselves and learn how to manage projects and their funding.... The grants really seed many of the projects that are now getting larger amounts of money... The GGF [Global Greengrants Fund] grants allow the local communities to start their own projects in an amount that they can handle. It’s small enough of an amount that you don’t get people fighting over the money, but it’s big enough to actually make a difference in the community and I think that’s what really has made these GGF [Global Greengrants Fund] grants work. Also the fact that you can get them quickly so you don’t lose the interest from the community, you get them in a couple of weeks, that just keeps the communities interested in doing the work..... In Micronesia, nothing works without community-led efforts, so we need to have our communities taking the lead on efforts around climate adaptation in order for it to work.”*

- Willy Kostka, advisor based on the Micronesia island of Pohnpei