

Background

Under the 2003 Overseas Development Assistance programme agreed between New Zealand and Samoa, the New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID) provided core funding to the Samoa Umbrella for Non-Governmental Organisations (SUNGO) and to six Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) for an indicative period of five years. The NGO Support Fund Committee (NSFC) made up of NZAID, NGO, Government (Ministry of Finance) representatives, and SUNGO as Chair, undertook an open and competitive process to select national, indigenous NGOs that were meeting the needs of their communities and had a poverty elimination focus, for core funding. By 2007 12 NGOs, including SUNGO, were receiving core funding for operational activities. SUNGO provides administrative and technical support for the NGO Support Fund (NSF) and to each of the recipient NGOs. The Fund has grown from NZ\$250,000 in 2003 to \$500,000 in 2007.

Experience in the first two years showed the need to further refine and strengthen the Fund's administrative processes and procedures. A monitoring mission in April 2005 made recommendations that were acted on by the NSFC. Capacity building for SUNGO staff, particularly the NSF Coordinator, positioned SUNGO to provide better technical support to NGOs.

The 2005 NSF Monitoring Report also recommended that SUNGO work with its members to identify the key development goals of NGOs and civil society, acknowledging that achieving agreement about shared goals within the sector will take time. It further recommended implementing a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework to assess the impact of the NSF, and to seek clarification between NGOs, civil society and government of their respective roles as partners. NZAID, SUNGO and the Samoan Government agreed to review the Fund focusing on the issues raised in the 2005 Monitoring Report, the impact on civil society of NGO core funding and to identify possible future directions for NZAID support.

Purpose and Objectives

The goal of the NGO Support Fund Review was to identify a long-term direction and rationale for Government and donor engagement with NGOs and civil society. The Review also considered the NSF within a context of the developing roles of NGOs and civil society and the part NGOs play in assisting communities and vulnerable groups build local capacity and reduce hardship. The Review's objectives were:

1. to improve stakeholder understanding of the nature and character of NGOs and Samoan civil society
2. to assess the contribution of the NGO Support Fund on NGO operation, the impact of the activities of the Fund-supported NGOs, and the quality of NGO engagement with wider civil society
3. to identify ways for developing the Fund, including developing an M&E Framework
4. to identify and recommend options for future support to strengthen and enhance SUNGO, the NGO sector and Samoan civil society in general.

Four NGOs were selected as case studies: O le Siosiomaga Society Inc (OLSSI); Fa'ataua le Ola (FLO); Nuana O le Alofa; and Women in Business Development Inc (WIBDI).

Main Findings

Feedback about the NSF was overwhelmingly positive. Aside from one NGO where capacity building funding was stopped, and another NGO, which has dissolved, all other NGOs have successfully prepared acquittal reports and met their organisational requirements. The Fund criteria support NGOs to operate in a way that focuses on development compatible with their own purpose and philosophy.

Objective one: Improve Stakeholder Understanding

NGOs funded through the NSF have been initiated, and are operated, by Samoans. While each individual involved with an NGO understands the way villages operate, not all villages understand the role of NGOs. Samoan NGOs are relatively new institutions and most are Apia-based with paid and volunteer staff. As a result, many village people think the NGOs in Apia are part of the government and therefore do not readily volunteer their time. This confusion over government or NGO status was clearest with the OLSSI, as there is a government department with a similar name.

While the role and criteria of the NSF were documented after the 2005 NSF Review, there is some evidence that NGOs do not necessarily have a common understanding of the purpose of the Fund. Some NGOs see the Fund as a tool for development and others for covering NGO costs. The Review suggested that it is crucial that a shared understanding is developed, and that NGO roles and work programmes are clear if the funded NGOs are to work effectively to achieve development outcomes.

Objective two: NSF Contribution to NGO Operation, Impact and Engagement

NSF contribution to NGO operation: the Review noted that having a number of well-functioning NGOs with management, planning and financial systems in place, along with fragile, but increasingly thoughtful, governance is a significant achievement. NGOs considered the financial support as vital to helping their organisations to function. All of the core-funded NGOs cited the NSF as enabling them to provide their mandated services and activities. For some, being an NSF recipient has helped NGOs leverage funds from other donors. All NGOs have developed organisational visions and missions. The areas of greatest vulnerability was identified as being able to attract and retain volunteers and building understanding of what the governance role means for Board members.

The Review found that the support from SUNGO was also valued and helped the NGOs to establish and operate financial management and reporting/accountability systems. NGOs also benefited through the NZAID-supported Unitec Graduate Diploma in Not for Profit Management (in-country delivery) or specific specialist training.

Impact of supported NGOs at the community level: the impact of the NSF varied depending on the starting point of the NGO and its strategic fund management. The impact of the funding was easier to identify for some NGO than for others, such as Nuana O le Alofa's ability to influence policy development on behalf of people with disabilities. WIBDI had examined the difference their work makes in the community more than other NGOs, and use a monitoring, evaluation and learning framework to identify impact (for example, that after the public sector – schools and hospital, WIBDI is now the greatest source of aiga income generation on Savai'i), and areas for organisational change and improvement.

The quality of NGO engagement with civil society and government: the main focus of each of the NGOs included in the Review was on organisational development; however, there were developing government, local and regional NGO, and/or donor partnerships involving three of the four NGOs. The Review found that while there is some ambivalence across government towards NGOs, they are now more respected and accepted by the Government. While there is still considerable work to be done to build greater understanding of the unique role and place of NGOs there is also increasing opportunity for project or contract funding through government departments.

Objective three: Ways to Develop the NFS

Length of funding: the five-year funding period under the NSF has not proved sufficient time for NGOs to find other significant funding for core costs or for NGOs to generate their own income. Accessing alternative funding remains one of the most difficult aspects for NGOs.

The meaning of community development and engagement: the community engagement and development criteria of the NSF are key philosophical bases to explore and build an agreed understanding of what engagement with village-based society means and how it could operate. Such agreement will help to inform discussions on whether the Fund should be extended beyond operational costs.

Monitoring and Evaluation: the Review considered that clarifying understanding of the community engagement and community development fund criteria is required before a monitoring and evaluation framework can be developed. The following steps were identified:

- SUNGO presenting and discussing their learning from PIANGO training on results-based evaluation to Samoan core-funded NGOs
- Core-funded NGOs identifying, separately and together– and with SUNGO and NZAID - their current needs, preferences and approaches to M&E
- the evaluation staff in NZAID Wellington working with SUNGO and core funded NGOs to develop a M&E framework that is relevant, effective, focuses on learning and adaptation, meets accountability requirements, and is user friendly and simple
- the ongoing costs for such a framework and its implementation being identified and built into the core funding.

Objective four: Future Support

The following options were identified for enhancing the sector through the Fund:

- strengthening Government and NGO relationships
- broader funding base (i.e. Fund harmonisation and eligibility expansion)
- staffing and volunteer attraction and retention
- differentiating NGO support – acknowledging that different NGOs require different approaches to support.

Key Issues and Learning for NZAID

Nature of the NGO Support Fund: it is not clear that Samoan NGOs have a shared understanding of the purpose of the Fund, with some see it as being to foster development and others for funding.

Village engagement: in Samoa, it is essential for development ideas and projects to recognise the dynamics of village societies, the relationship between the various sectors of the village and how they relate and work with each other.

Long-term process: a five-year period is not sufficient for NGOs to develop other funding or income sources; however, NGOs at different stages of development have different needs for support from the NSF. Once NGOs' funding is confirmed for operational overhead costs, and management and financial systems are implemented, there is greater opportunity (and need) for NGOs to explore understanding of development effectiveness. There are opportunities for M&E development, especially given the maturity of some NGOs, their varying experiences with M&E and the interest of SUNGO and PIANGO.

Follow-up

- NSF to continue with the same level of funding, with consideration to extending the term
- explore and implement operational improvements (e.g. governance training for Board members, improving NZAID tranche payments)
- SUNGO to organise regular NGO meetings to identify fund effectiveness, exchange learning, discuss issues and trends
- consideration of a Government/donor-harmonised NGO sector facility
- NSF Committee and SUNGO to develop, with core-funded NGOs, a consistent community development approach
- series of steps to develop a M&E framework
- WIBDI merits a full impact assessment.