

Australia Africa Community Grants Scheme (AACGS)

Independent Review

October 2012

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Consultants:	Mr Rob Allaburton Dr Paul Crawford
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Dr Frank Thompson

AusAID
Australian High Commission
Private Bag X150, Arcadia, 0083, Pretoria
South Africa
www.ausaid.gov.au
Tel: +27 12 423 6173
Fax: +27 12 342 4201

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AID ACTIVITY SUMMARY

Aid Activity Name	Australia Africa Community Grants Scheme		
AidWorks initiative number	INJ344		
Commencement date	01/07/2010	Completion date	NA
Total Australian \$	2010-2011 final expenditure \$3,906,222 2011-2012 final expenditure \$3,541,078 Total to date: \$7,447,300		
Total other \$	NA		
Delivery organisation(s)	AusAID (direct management)		
Implementing Partner(s)	Various CSOs		
Country/Region	Africa		
Primary Sector	Flexible		

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Mid Term Review team wishes to acknowledge the significant and valuable contributions made by many organisations and people, beginning with the AusAID team in Africa. Special thanks are due to Dr Frank Thompson, AusAID Pretoria, who commissioned the work and Anne Creux, AusAID Pretoria, who has been involved with AACGS since its inception and carries much of the history and background. Her assistance with project details and coordination of the overall task as well as her insights were all very valuable.

Thanks is also due to the other AusAID staff at the posts of Pretoria, Nairobi, Accra and Sierra Leone who not only arranged all the logistics of the site visits and accompanied the MTR to all the field locations but also shared many insights about the activities and provided suggestions for improvement. Other DFAT staff at these posts also provided valuable assistance, especially with respect to linkages between the grant scheme and the Development Assistance Program.

Then there were the senior managers and field workers of the many implementing partners, government agencies and other stakeholders connected with the projects including leaders in targeted communities along with the actual beneficiaries, so many of whom went to great lengths to share their experiences in being part of the projects and thus greatly assisted in the task of proposing appropriate recommendations to guide AusAID in more effective implementation of the scheme.

Of special assistance was the time taken by beneficiaries to welcome the MTR into their communities, project groups and often into their homes so the team could see first-hand the impact achieved as a result of their participation in the funded projects.

AUTHOR DETAILS

Mr Rob Allaburton, Principal Consultant, Allaburton and Associates, specialising in capacity building, training and skills development, and monitoring and evaluation
robllaburton@gmail.com; mobile +61414 74 5277

Dr Paul Crawford (Aid-IT Solutions Pty Ltd) is an independent monitoring and evaluation specialist who takes a 'soft systems' approach, drawing on experience in around 40 countries with a range of development and humanitarian organisations. pcrawford@aid-it.com.au; mobile +61 410 45 1369.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

This document presents the findings of a mid-term review (MTR) of the Australia Africa Community Grants Scheme (AACGS)—an initiative of the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID). Field work was carried out during the period 8 – 31 July, 2012 in South Africa, Kenya, Ghana and Sierra Leone. A total of 180 stakeholders were interviewed of whom 121 (or 67%) were women. This MTR examined the management and implementation of the Scheme over the first two years of activity, focussing on the quality of program outcomes and the merit of selected projects.

Overall, this evaluation found the Scheme to be well regarded by implementing partners, beneficiaries and community/government representatives. From AusAID's standpoint, the Scheme has enabled a rapid extension of influence in grounded/relevant domains with a relatively small investment of resources. No obvious areas of waste or governance failure were observed (noting the limited sample for this evaluation). The evaluation team concluded that AusAID should continue to implement AACGS for the remainder of the timeframe committed, and then conduct an independent review to determine further directions in the developing context.

Facility scope

AusAID has supported interventions at community-level by non-government, private sector and government agencies in African countries since 2005/06. From July 2010 AusAID's community assistance was channelled through the AACGS ('the Scheme'), which up to July 2012 invested \$7,447,300 in support of 143 projects bridging 16 sectors in 34 countries throughout Africa—an average allocation of \$219,038 per country. The highest levels of investment were in South Africa (30%), Kenya (12%) and Comoros (5%). Of the 143 projects funded, the greatest investments were in vocational skills development (14.6%), followed by food security (13.9%) and then health (11%). The Scheme prioritises activities that promote a significant Australian identity, and/or linkages with Australia and provides a way for AusAID to fund small activities that cannot be readily accommodated within major programs. The goal of the AACGS is to contribute to the achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in Africa at the community level; and its objective is to enable organisations in a broad range of African countries to access flexible funding for effective community level development activities. The broad nature of this goal and objective mean that the Scheme can accommodate more or less any reasonable development activity, but this also means that it is difficult to determine what success 'looks like'. The goal and objective statements describe approaches rather than desired 'end states'. From a development standpoint, a stronger results orientation that defines the desired 'end states' that the Scheme might plausibly contribute to in people's lives would be more constructive.

Facility contribution, including to cross-cutting themes

The Scheme has contributed to numerous results in diverse contexts, such as: empowerment of women; improved MCH; improved governance; improved food production; empowerment of PLWHIV; improved basic educational skills development for youth. Nine of the 143 projects funded through the Scheme at the time of this review had an explicit focus on improving gender equality and 13 on improving the situation of people with a disability. A significant proportion of the portfolio is likely to have implicitly contributed to improving the circumstances of women and the disabled. In addition to the policy priority domains of gender and disability, the Scheme also contributed to a range of other development cross-cutting themes. Greater discussion and coordination between the posts would be necessary if particular sectors or cross-cutting themes were to be prioritised in the future. The evaluation team formed the view that the Scheme is broadly aligned with the intent of key development strategies, although by design the Scheme has supported projects in a wide array of thematic/sectoral areas—defensible in the context of AusAID's nascent development partnerships in much of Africa. Almost three quarters of the Scheme's activities are aligned with AusAID's three

strategic goals. The Scheme's alignment with partner country objectives is more difficult to determine and is less systematically pursued.

Quality of implementation

The quality of implementation is a function of the professionalism of implementing partners. Professionalism may be further understood in terms of ethical conduct, project management skills, and the technical qualifications/experience of field staff. The evaluation team formed the view that the level of professionalism was commensurate with AusAID's investment, and witnessed implementing staff and volunteers with a strong commitment to ethical conduct. Project management and technical skills were difficult to assess within the time and resources available, but of the projects visited, all had proceeded more or less to plan and were within budget.

Conceptual tensions

There is a conceptual tension underpinning the Scheme: is it a mechanism to promote public diplomacy outcomes, or a mechanism to promote effective/sustainable development outcomes? The rationale for the Scheme anticipates an area of overlap between these two agendas. In terms of practical strategies to maximise AusAID's visibility and exposure, the evaluation team noted that signage was an area that had not necessarily been well resourced, but most NGO representatives were able to show that AusAID was referenced in reports, in a web presence and verbally at public meetings or forums. Arguably, the best way to generate goodwill and a positive profile—especially within civil society—is to support good projects. While this is perhaps a truism, it is at the heart of the value of AACGS.

The Scheme supports work in a diversity of sectors and contexts, and as such can be criticised for lacking focus and coherence; or alternatively can be lauded for being flexible/responsive. The budget and time allocations are small and hence limit the likelihood that major development impacts can be fostered. An initiative such as AACGS carries several challenges for a bilateral donor. On one hand, the total investment in AACGS represents a significant sum of money, and as such demands risk management controls and quality assurance systems. On the other hand, the small size and high volume of individual grants renders the development and application of such systems inefficient and difficult to justify. There is likely to be a 'sweet spot' in terms of the minimum amount of resources and time required to effect meaningful changes in communities. However, the more time and resources invested, the greater the risk that any individual project carries. Also, greater resources could encounter absorptive limits in some implementing partners. Future resource levels for the Scheme depend on the strategic purpose of the AACGS for AusAID. If AusAID's predominant focus is on increasing the agency's visibility in Africa and being responsive to emerging opportunities and needs, then a 'business as usual' scenario is defensible. However, if AusAID chooses a more purposeful engagement in Africa, then the Scheme could evolve such that fewer partners are funded with larger budgets over longer timeframes. Also, a practical issue to be addressed is how the allocation should be divided between regions. Arguably, a consultative process to 'divide the pie' could allow AusAID staff to respond to new/emerging opportunities in particular countries that are supportive of the aid program's objectives.

Potential for outsourcing

AusAID staff at Posts indicated that they are extremely pressed; and consequently they have limited ability to conduct even minimal M&E/risk assessment activities—virtually no structured/formal M&E processes were carried out until this review. An outsourced secretariat could arrange such processes, record minutes, and action any administrative follow-up. The existing AAPF is well placed to carry out some of the activities that might be outsourced. But first it is worth AusAID first examining what benefits to the Commonwealth might be lost with less direct involvement in the Scheme.

M&E and risk management

Notwithstanding the risk to AusAID that arises from the limited human resources, and hence the limited investment in risk management and M&E; the review noted that a range of mitigating factors may have helped to assure the integrity of AACGS investments. These factors are elaborated in the report but include: NGO track record; reliance on co-funding; engagement of consortia; agreements over limited timeframes; narrow funding criteria; alignment of apparent values; small grant values. There could be advantages in AusAID supporting additional low-cost M&E activities that seek greater engagement in the field and with implementing partners. Some administrative elements that could be outsourced to the Australia Africa Partnerships Facility (AAPF) without negatively impacting on the qualitative issues where AusAID staff would benefit by remaining involved: secretariat services; receipt of the proposals; summary of approved projects; arranging end of project telephone conferences; follow up of potential publicity stories.

(see next page for consolidated recommendations)

CONSOLIDATED RECOMMENDATIONS

1. AusAID should continue to implement AACGS for the remainder of the timeframe committed, and then conduct an independent review to determine further directions in the developing context. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
 2. AusAID should consider adopting a consultative sub-regional approach to annual AACGS budget allocation; facilitated either by Pretoria or Canberra. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
 3. AusAID should consider providing additional administrative support to assist Scheme management activities—especially during periods of peak workload. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
 4. Within AusAID there should be should discussion to determine the strategic purposes of the Scheme, and willingness to adjust the funding guidelines to align with an agreed strategic intent. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
 5. AusAID should consider outsourcing administrative functions currently undertaken by the Pretoria post to the AAPF. Key program/representative functions should be retained at all posts in order to maximise the strategic benefits of the scheme to the agency. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
 6. AusAID should consider engaging an independent monitoring mechanism to routinely support AusAID staff with field visits of a sample of projects. Such a mechanism could be engaged directly or through AAPF. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
 7. AusAID should engage AAPF to provide ‘secretariat’ services to support to AACGS staff at posts other than Pretoria with the extent of these services to be determined by each post on a needs basis. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
 8. AusAID should reflect on the extent to which the AACGS should proactively align with the agency’s gender and disability corporate focus or continue with opportunistic engagements. There may be value in agreeing on a ‘quota’ for projects each year to address priority themes. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
 9. Given that the current funding cycle is usually limited to 12 months, AusAID should continue to seek projects that integrate with existing agencies such as schools, health clinics and agriculture extension agencies to ensure projects are not isolated but engage with existing initiatives to reinforce existing government policies/processes and thus maximise impact and the likelihood of sustainability. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
 10. AusAID should define a coherent theory of change for the Scheme and articulate the desired ‘end states’ the projects are expected to contribute towards. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
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