

# Small grants in a big country

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In a country like Brazil where many still live in poverty, fighting inequality and social exclusion are top priorities, and they require social change. Brazilian philanthropy – or private social investment, as it is called in Brazil – has been growing and developing for the past 20 years, mainly because of the consolidation of democracy, the strengthening of civil society, and monetary stability and economic growth. Nevertheless, it is still trying to find the best way for communities, individuals and businesses to carry out strategic philanthropy. In this connection, the potential of small grants is enormous.



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Small grants are not new in Brazil. The Catholic Church and the international cooperation agencies, through their embassies, have both supported small grants programmes in the country. In the 1980s, Brazilian Caritas launched Alternative Community Projects, aimed at fighting rural poverty and hunger, and the Latin American Council of Churches created the Fund to Support Small Civil Society Projects. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) has run the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives since 1993. Designed to support small projects created and implemented by local organizations that offer direct social, economic or technical assistance to local people, the Canada Fund gives priority to projects that increase the self-reliance of local communities and organizations so that gains can be sustained after project funding ends. Many of the numerous organizations it supports are in very remote areas of the country.

The small grants approach is attractive to the Brazilian context for several reasons.

## Diversity of interventions, beneficiaries and contexts

In a country the size of Brazil, with great geographic, cultural, economic and social differences, there is an absolute need to offer a similar range of interventions. Small grants can easily address the specific needs, interests and opportunities of a wide array of beneficiaries and their contexts. They can support interventions that range from community mobilization, training and capacity-building, and income generation, to institutional development and participatory research. Beneficiaries can be as specific as particular population groups, such as *quilombola* or particular native communities, or more general, such as children

at risk or women. They can support the work of a large range of civil society organizations, social movements and individuals.

Take the Brazil Human Rights Fund, which funds projects ranging from US\$6,000 to \$15,000 for up to a year. The fund supports projects by individuals and civil society organizations committed to human rights advocacy in the struggle against institutional violence and discrimination. For the past three years it has awarded small grants in four thematic areas, citizenship, gender, race and land. As vice-president for project management Sueli Carneiro writes in the 2007–08 annual report, ‘The grants awarded by the Brazil Human Rights Fund cover a wide range of issues, from efforts to combat and prevent slave labour in the remotest areas of our country to strengthening movements to resist institutionalized violence in state capitals and other large cities.’

Another example is the Elas Social Investment Fund, which awards small grants to strengthen initiatives by women’s groups and organizations throughout Brazil. It supports several types of project, including initiatives on ethnic, racial, sexual, generational and other types of diversity. Operating since 2001, the Elas Fund has awarded small grants to about 180 women’s groups.

## Participation and empowerment

Another aspect of a small grants approach that is of particular relevance to Brazil is its capacity to engage volunteers, thus helping to promote citizen participation and community empowerment, both crucial elements in bringing about social change. Small grants also tend to use a bottom-up approach to project planning, allowing project stakeholders to participate actively in the identification of needs and advocacy for their rights and interests. This in turn fosters empowerment and develops the idea of the community’s responsibility for its own development.

The Canada Fund for Local Initiatives, for instance, allows CIDA to respond positively and quickly to requests for project financing that lend themselves to the active participation of the local community. With a small grant of US\$6,000, the Canada Fund supported the Vida Nova project in Aquarraz, Ceará. Run by a local NGO, the project used the grant to develop educational materials on teenage pregnancy. The project was developed and carried out by volunteers from the local community, who continued to work on the educational activities after the end of the project funded by CIDA. ▷

### Focus on local, community-based development

Small grants tend to support very local interventions. Part of the appeal of this for donors in Brazil is that social change can be better detected and monitored at the local community level. In addition, small local projects have as a starting point the specific circumstances and characteristics of the community, hence contributing to strengthen local culture and knowledge. In the Brazilian context of inequalities between regions, this is very important.

CASA is an organization dedicated to strengthening organized civil society, with a focus on community grassroots groups, NGOs, networks and collectives that deal with environmental sustainability and social challenges. It offers the small grants that are essential for building the capacity of local grassroots organizations, which are difficult to get in Brazil. One organization whose development CASA has supported is Vida Pantaneira, a socio-environmental organization located in Porto Murтинha, Brazil.

### Partnership and sustainability

Small grants tend to support short-term projects. Two important things flow from this: first, results are seen rapidly, solving or ameliorating a perceived problem; second, these projects tend to be connected with other initiatives, developed by the same organization or by a partner, and share equipment, infrastructure and human resources, thus producing a form of synergy. This interaction permits the continuity of activities beyond the scope of the project, contributing to the sustainability of the initiative.

The REDINs Programme, developed and implemented by the Institute for the Development of Social Investment (IDIS), with funding from the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, awarded grants of up to US\$15,000 for local projects on early childhood education. The funding criteria included the participation of partners from civil society, businesses and local governments and matching funding of one to one. All projects funded were able to match their small grants, sometimes reaching a ratio of three dollars for each dollar offered by the IDIS grant. This certainly contributed to the establishment of partnerships in a common cause and to the sustainability of the results achieved by the initial project.

In 2007, the State Government of Rio Grande do Sul, in partnership with several NGOs and businesses, launched the Social Partnership Network Program (Rede Parceria Social). The programme offers small grants, ranging from US\$8,000 to US\$15,000, to NGOs



A 'kitchen corner' used in the REDINs programme to promote life skills with children.

running social projects throughout the state. The grants are awarded by the businesses that are part of the network, such as the clothing retail chain Lojas Renner, which offers small grants to local projects focusing on women's empowerment and gender equity.

### Simple and agile grantmaking

Small grants require simple procedures for project management and monitoring which are readily accessible to community-based organizations. This is particularly important in Brazil, where the non-profit sector is still developing and community organizations often lack the capacity to deal with the complicated bureaucratic requirements of traditional grantmaking programmes. Dealing with small grants can be the entry for community-based organizations into the world of grantmaking, and an excellent opportunity for them to build capacity and gain leverage to apply to other sources of funding.

### Two problems

Finally, although we have focused our attention on successful small grants experiences, it is important to mention two problems. First, because of the complexity of the processes of empowerment, cultural change and infrastructure development, small grants projects usually require a long time to be developed. However, small grants usually support short-term interventions.

Second, some funders have noticed that although their small grants programmes are aimed at local communities, their organizations often have less access to information and are not aware that grants are available. Larger organizations tend to have easier access to information so are more likely to apply for these funds. @

### For more information

**Brazil Human Rights Fund** [www.fundodireitoshumanos.org.br](http://www.fundodireitoshumanos.org.br)

**Brazilian Caritas** [www.caritas.org.br](http://www.caritas.org.br)

**Canada Fund** <http://tinyurl.com/Alliance20>

**CASA** [www.casa.org.br](http://www.casa.org.br)

**ELAS Social Investment Fund** [www.angelaborbafundo.org](http://www.angelaborbafundo.org)

**IDIS** [www.idis.org.br](http://www.idis.org.br)

**Rede Parceria Social** <http://tinyurl.com/Alliance18>