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Apr 23, 2020 by [Courtney Nelson](#)

Small Investments Go a Long Way: How Seed Grants Contribute to American Public Diplomacy ^[1]

As the saying goes, a little can go a long way. This idiom holds true when assessing the impact seed grant funding programs have in community development and 21st century public diplomacy.


With the novel coronavirus pandemic bringing daily life, as we know it, to a near halt around the world, public diplomacy practitioners will need to adjust and rethink our approaches to effective global engagement in the weeks, months and years ahead.

Seed grants provide a space to support and empower individuals at a grassroots level to achieve long-lasting change at minimal financial cost.

Traditional American public diplomacy hinges largely on an emphasis of mutual understanding, sharing cultural knowledge and advancing foreign policy priorities around the world. Seed grant programs build on these efforts by focusing on inclusive collaboration with local leaders and situating the U.S. as a global partner.

While various seed grant models exist, the general approach is to provide a small sum of money to projects developed by local community leaders to be implemented over a specific time period. This can be through a standalone small grant competition, or as a supplemental activity building on existing public diplomacy initiatives.

These locally endorsed projects can target the most salient issues identified within the community. Through this approach, seed grant projects work to tackle problems that project leaders work to address firsthand, and in supporting these leaders, American public diplomacy promotes indigenous solutions-oriented action.

Examples of some of the U.S.'s seed grant projects are based in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific, where over 60 percent of the world's youth (ages 15–24) live , making the region ripe for investment. Through the U.S. Department of State's Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) and the Young Pacific Leaders (YPL) program, emerging young leaders apply for funding to implement a project within their community or region focused on civic leadership, economic and social development, education, and environment and resource management.

Together, let us help farmers bounce back from the Covid-19 crisis. Let us #SupportFarmersPH!#GrowASEAN is a project funded by the @USMission2ASEAN through the YSEALI Seeds program. Learn more about what we do: <https://t.co/DA8LuPfYg5> @YSEALISeeds @yseali @CulturalVistas pic.twitter.com/PF1CnwJ8Sf

— Tagani Philippines (@TaganiPH) April 6, 2020

Grow ASEAN, a 2020 YSEALI Seeds for the Future grantee, is adapting to meet the needs of Filipino farmers amid the coronavirus pandemic by training them in digital agriculture.

When we talk about seed grant successes, Tesdopi immediately comes to mind. In parts of Southeast Asia and particularly in Cambodia, limited access to quality STEM education puts young students at a significant disadvantage in their educational and career pursuits. In Cambodia alone, about 70 percent of high school students failed at least one STEM subject, while nearly 40 percent fail to pass their national exams every year.

This was the impetus for Tesdopi, a mobile app and initiative that creates workshops, video tutorials and behavior-change campaigns to help students excel in math and science and better prepare for national exams.

Tesdopi was one of 21 small grant recipients through the YSEALI Seeds for the Future program in 2019, and project leader Sovan Srun was named The Startupper of the Year 2019 in Cambodia.

Seed funding has given this fledgling project a significant boost, enabling it to provide data-

driven, timely and personalized STEM learning strategies to thousands of youth across the country.

As with most seed investments, the intention is to provide a relatively modest sum of money to start an initiative with the aim to grow and secure additional financing. Through this model, grantees build financial and management capacity, providing opportunities for local leaders to leverage their seed grant into longterm sustainable projects.

Beyond the initial investment, seed grant programs also provide training, mentorship and collaborative engagement between grantees and their community partners.

This has been the case in Fiji and Papua New Guinea, where “can do” is not only a motto, but the name of a movement among youth, led by Fijian exchange alumni Isoa Nabainivalu, Krishneer Sen and Gael Seru, who are advocating for the rights of local deaf communities in both nations.



Krishneer Sen, a 2018 alumnus of the Young Pacific Leaders Small Grants Program, uses sign language to translate the Fiji Prime Minister's COVID-19 messaging for the deaf community. (Credit: U.S. Department of State.) [View more.](#)

Now in the second year of the project, this 2018 YPL Small Grants Program awardee has met the initial goal of working with the Fiji Association of the Deaf to support the establishment of legal status for Fijian Sign Language and to provide resources to deaf communities. This initiative continues to push forward in the effort of making both countries more accessible and inclusive for all.

The evolution of the project is not the only the reported success, but team members themselves advance their skills and capacities in areas that include mentorship, advocacy, cross-cultural communication, business development, evaluation and negotiation, to name a few.

Furthermore, empowering women is a long-term agenda of South Asia's social transformation. Despite advances in women-owned social enterprises, women in India and Pakistan continue to face substantial societal and financial barriers in reducing gender inequalities. In surveys conducted by the Stanford Social Innovation Review and the Center for International Private Enterprise, the top barrier routinely identified by female social entrepreneurs in both countries is the lack of investment to get their enterprises off the ground.

In September 2018, U.S. Embassy New Delhi funded a women's social enterprise, TechCamp South Asia workshop, which included supplemental seed grant projects to provide funding to female entrepreneurs in both India and Pakistan to advance social good in their communities.



TechCamp South Asia: In September 2018, U.S. Embassy New Delhi funded a women's social enterprise, TechCamp South Asia workshop, to provide funding to female entrepreneurs in both India and Pakistan to advance social good. (Credit: Cultural Vistas)

This small investment has since helped to spur innovation in India, where rising leaders such as Gitanjali Banerjee are using technology to transform women's health.

Banerjee is the founder of Fertility Dost, a social impact startup and India's first web-based platform providing resources for fertility-related problems and preventive solutions in India. Her TechCamp seed grant award enabled her to rebrand her company and create Map My Fertility, a user-friendly portal to disseminate information, create awareness and provide tools to help couples make empowered decisions.

With the increased momentum behind her social impact venture, Banerjee landed a deal from Harper Collins to write a book examining fertility issues from the perspective of the patient, the first of its kind in India from a major publisher.

The sustainability focus of seed grant programs highlights its unique effectiveness as a U.S. public diplomacy instrument intended to promote long-term engagement and investment within a community.

As the world confronts a health crisis not seen in a century, it is important to start rethinking how traditional public diplomacy will need to evolve so that we can continue to strengthen relationships and advance cooperation around the world.

Without assuming or prescribing, the seed-grants model provides space for the U.S. to partner with change-makers around the world in a nimble and flexible manner that can still create longstanding and significant impact.

Our motto: *Small grants. Big rewards.*
