

EVALUATION OF SIGHTSAVERS INNOVATION FUND ROUND 1

Executive Summary

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The Innovation Fund is part of the Sightsavers Programme Partnership Arrangement (PPA) with the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). It was established to encourage innovative projects to be tried and tested, with the aim of learning lessons that could lead to breakthroughs in how Sightsavers does its development work and, through sharing and communication, influence development actors including DFID and other agencies working to improve eye health. The fund primarily used DFID's definition of innovation, which states that innovation does not "necessarily mean 'brand new' "(e.g., innovative practices, innovative partnerships, innovative approaches). It noted that there is an "element of experimentation" involved, with the "risk of failure"¹. Allocating part of its PPA to encouraging innovation is a positive and creative move by Sightsavers. This evaluation also shows clearly that some excellent development outcomes are being delivered through the Round 1 projects.

Five projects in four countries were selected in Round 1 of the Innovation Fund in September 2011 with the intention that they would start as soon as possible though in practice some projects started later due to a variety of issues. The selection process involved initial recommendation by UK-based Sightsavers staff, who referred promising projects from the Commitments Management Process (CMP) to Innovation panels of internal and external experts for further assessment. The Nigeria project was excluded from the evaluation due to its nature and duration.

This evaluation was commissioned in late 2012 to investigate progress, to examine each project using three basic criteria (structure, process and outcomes/results), and to make recommendations for adjustments and changes to ensure each project could deliver on its aims. This included asking questions about the way the projects were organised to deliver their results, what monitoring systems were in place to track progress, what additional inputs might be needed to ensure that desired results would be delivered on time and to budget, and what plans were in place to collect, analyse and communicate the lessons learned from the projects. The evaluators were also required to review what plans were in place to scale up and replicate projects and methods that had proved to be successful and innovative.

¹DFID GPAF Innovation Fund Guidelines;
<http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/funding/gpaf/glob-pov-act-fnd-guide-appls.pdf>

The evaluation used desk research and initial semi-structured interviews to establish the background and rationale for the Innovation Fund and how its projects were selected. Each project was then visited on the ground, where interviews were conducted with implementing Country Office (CO) staff and partners of Sightsavers, as well as beneficiaries and other relevant stakeholders such as advocacy targets and private sector collaborators. This phase also involved observation and examination of locally-produced data and information, as well as participation in various group discussions and project-related seminars and forums.

The evaluators found that the projects varied enormously in aims, content, duration and budget, and in general were broadly on track to deliver their objectives as set out in their logframes. Concerns had been expressed (e.g. in the TOR for this evaluation) about the progress of these Round 1 projects, but we found these concerns were generally unfounded. Work on the ground was seen to be having real impact; in Pakistan, for example, inclusive and accessible water and sanitation was making fundamental changes for how disabled people were living, for their confidence, and for how they were accepted as part of their communities. The work in Bangladesh on including disabled people in disaster planning, and in Tanzania on strengthening provision of eye care, were also making a difference for target communities. We have written a chapter for each project, highlighting achievements and, where relevant, areas that could be improved for that specific project.

The evaluators addressed the issue of whether the projects are innovative, since their ultimate success, according to the guidelines for the Innovation Fund, is tied to their delivery of lessons and to learning and the possibility of replication and scale-up. Applying the full implications of the DFID definition including the aspect of experimentation and risk, most projects contained activities that were innovative, though some of the techniques and approaches, while effective and appropriate, were not innovative. We recommend that Sightsavers is very clear, before the stage is reached of documenting and communication learning, exactly what is the innovation being highlighted, to aid future replication and scaling-up. We did not find risks had explicitly been taken, and we recognise risking possible failure is counter-intuitive, especially when spending donor money. We would encourage management to support more risk-taking, in the spirit of the Innovation Fund, because the potential gains are enormous.

We found the main area that needs addressing is the planning for lesson-learning, scaling up and replication. There were positive examples (e.g., the links being established in Pakistan with Comsats University to document the lessons from the water and sanitation work); but even though attempts such as this to collect learning from some projects were in the pipeline overall the projects lacked a clear and consistent approach to this essential aspect. This lack of evidence may be due to the relatively early stage in the Round 1 projects' cycles at which the evaluation was carried out, and there is certainly time to adjust this aspect through better communication about what is expected and the provision of external resources if required. The lack of focus on the learning commitment appeared to be a result of the Round 1 process where project proposals were not originally written for the Innovation Fund, with its additional conditions, with the result that some CO staff did not

realise the full implications in terms of learning and communication. We understand this has been addressed in Round 2 of the Innovation Fund

One suggestion from the evaluators to increase risk-taking and innovation, and therefore to ensure there are breakthroughs in new approaches, partnerships and techniques to document and share, is to use the Innovation Fund for shorter, explicitly experimental projects. These could be more focused in scope and more clearly pilot projects that could, if successful, lend themselves more readily to generating learning and to scaling up. The Innovation Fund is a good idea; it requires conviction, courage, leadership and good communication within Sightsavers to make it work, not least in supporting CO staff and overseas partners to be bold. The Innovation Fund has the potential to deliver, to the benefit of Sightsavers and to others who learn from its lessons, if innovation is actively encouraged, as we understand is happening with Round 2.

Evaluation Matrix: Overall Rating for Innovation Fund Round 1 projects (i.e., are they “on track”?)

GREEN = evidence that the project is on track for that particular criterion

AMBER = evidence that, with some adjustments, the criterion will be satisfactory

RED = lack of evidence, or evidence that major adjustments are needed

Project	Rating
Bangladesh: Disability Inclusive Disaster Preparedness and Management focusing Alternative Livelihood	GREEN
Tanzania: Zanzibar Comprehensive Eye Health Project	GREEN
Pakistan: Community-based Diabetes Prevention and Control	AMBER
Pakistan: Ensuring social inclusion through accessible water and sanitation	GREEN

