

Taking the back seat: community philanthropy in PNG

by Marina van der Vlies

4 October 2023



Community members in front of Kopeng aid post during a Digicel Foundation project evaluation visit in February 2023

Photo Credit: Helen Mela/Digicel Foundation

The question of how to make development aid more effective is a challenging one. A major issue is that most development aid is an external intervention. In current debates about international development aid, terms such as “shifting the power” and “localisation” suggest a future with local people having decision-making power over their destiny, working *with* but not *for* external development actors who are there to support, not to lead. A crucial aspect of these debates is the participation of community beneficiaries, leading to increased local ownership and a higher level of sustainability.

When most people talk about community development in Papua New Guinea, they are talking about foreign aid. However, in February and March of this year, I had the opportunity to study a different type of community development work – work involving a domestic donor, the **Digicel Foundation** (DF). This type of work is sometimes referred to as “**community philanthropy**”, an overarching term for development approaches that emerge from communities or countries where the work is undertaken. While it differs from aid, it has important lessons for aid work. The work I studied was also an exciting example of a new type of civil society in action in PNG.

In particular, my research focused on the sustainability of DF’s projects. The topic of my research was a community grant-making program operated by DF, a corporate foundation that was established in 2008 and is active in the philanthropic sector of PNG. The reason for doing research in PNG, and specifically with DF, goes back to my work as founding CEO of DF from 2008 to 2012. My belief, formed during those years in PNG, is that sustained project benefits are crucial.

What I wanted to learn now was the factors that contribute to sustainability in the context of community-led development interventions. So I undertook a master’s degree in Anthropology and Development Studies, with my thesis research focusing on the question “What factors contribute to the sustainability of the projects in DF’s

Community Grants Program in PNG?”

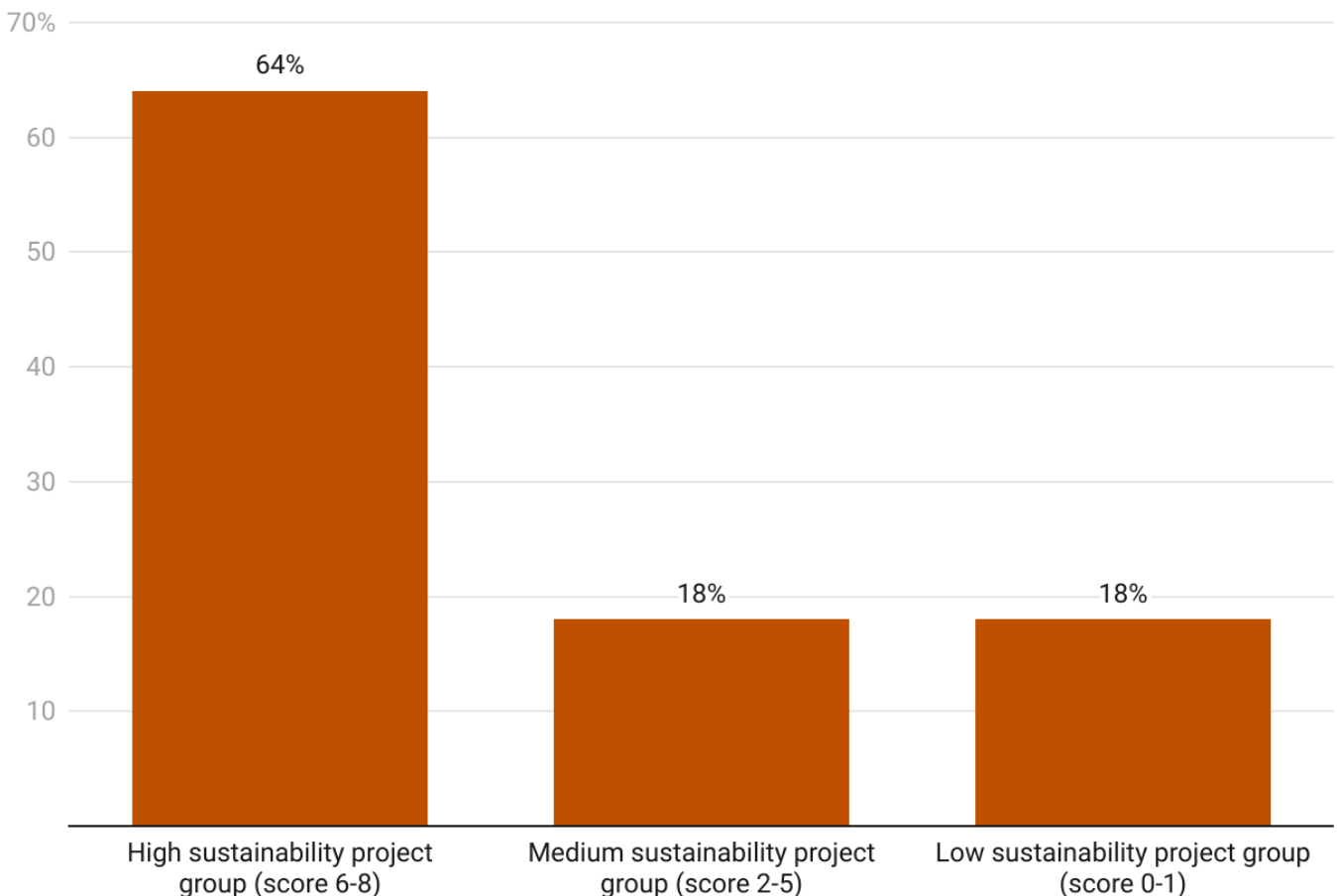
DF’s “**Leadership for Change**” **Community Grants Program** was launched in 2019. The program aims to support local organisations with community grants of up to 50,000 kina (approximately A\$20,000) to deliver projects that provide local solutions to local problems.

In my research, I analysed 22 local organisations that received a community grant in 2019-20 and 2020-21 for infrastructure projects. The projects were evaluated in terms of their sustainability level on a scale from 0 to 8. **Sustainability was assessed** by measuring whether the intended results were achieved and whether they continued to exist after the withdrawal of external donor support.

Figure 1 shows the project sustainability levels (high, medium or low) of the 22 community grant projects studied. Most projects (64%) demonstrated a high sustainability level. These projects are fully operational and mostly self-reliant with the intended outputs reached and most outcomes achieved.

Figure 1: Project sustainability levels

% of projects with high, medium or low sustainability level



Created with Datawrapper

Subsequently, I investigated the potential factors contributing to the different sustainability levels of the project groups. I had three main findings.

First, community contributions matter. These local resources can be financial – the community raising part of the funds for the project themselves – and/or non-financial – for example, community members helping in kind by providing unskilled or skilled labour, accommodation and/or food for the workers, clearing the road, or transporting building materials. Another kind of local resource is local social capital – social knowledge and networks within the community can be mobilised for a project, for example, the village councillor will know the leaders of village cooperatives who are trusted and best placed to train community members in specific skills via train-the-trainer programs. And another kind of local resource is local reputational capital, through a community member or local organisation with a good reputation (for example a local businessman or woman, nurse or missionary) being involved in the project.

Projects with a low level of sustainability seem to have failed due to the community not contributing, resulting in a lack of ownership.

I also found that DF used its “external” resources to leverage these local resources by, for example, using its social media platforms to tell the stories to help build a community’s reputation and using its networks to connect grantees to government or other development partners.

My second finding was that groups with more capacity did better. Communities need to have the capabilities to manage the implementation of the development activities. My findings showed that projects with a low level of sustainability seem to have failed due to recipient communities needing more capabilities to implement the project. Projects with a higher level of sustainability have in common that the grantees have capacity-building skills or work with partners that provide these skills. Strong community leadership also plays an important role, with some of the projects showing strong leaders mobilising local resources.

And third, building trust is key. To build relevant skills and confidence within communities, development actors need to trust and engage with their beneficiaries and consider them as partners. My research showed that longer term relationships were built by giving multiple grants to grantees of successful projects and through introducing them to other development partners by giving them a platform to build their reputation and social networks. DF, as a donor, mostly liaises with local NGOs, churches and community-based organisations that already have a long-term relationship with the community beneficiaries.

Based on these key research findings, I have the following recommendations for external development actors in the aid sector.

- Design development interventions that are community-led and focus on leveraging local assets, for example by encouraging communities to co-invest in kind.
- Support communities with the capacity to implement the project. If communities don't have sufficient capacity, encourage them to work with trusted local partners to fill the capacity gap.
- Listen to what communities say they need, and develop long-term relationships through partnerships.

Disclosures:

This research was conducted by the author as part of her master's thesis. Digicel Foundation PNG supported the research. The author was founding CEO of the Digicel Foundation from 2008 to 2012, prior to the commencement in 2019 of the scheme evaluated in this research. The views represent those of the author only.

Author/s:

Marina van der Vlies

Marina van der Vlies was founding CEO of Digicel Foundation in PNG from 2008 to 2012. She recently completed a master's degree in Anthropology and Development Studies at the Radboud University in Nijmegen, The Netherlands.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/taking-the-back-seat-community-philanthropy-in-png-20231004/>