Submission to consultation for a stronger, more diverse and independent community sector

Submission by: Selena Choo, Founder, Humans Like Us

Date: 6 November 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission.

My submission relates specifically to 2 questions in your issues paper, 4.1 and 5.2:

4	**Ensuring grant funding flows to a greater diversity of Community Service Organisations**
4.1	How can the government ensure opportunities are available for new and emerging organisations to access funding?

5.	**Partnering with trusted community organisations with strong local links**
5.2	What innovative approaches could be implemented to ensure grant funding reaches trusted community organisations with strong local links?

My relevant experience and expertise

Since 2017 I have been part of the community sector that supports refugees and people seeking asylum. My work has included:

1. drafting grant applications and final acquittal reports for 4 grassroots community organisations run by refugees building a new life in Australia – Huma Media, the Australian Hazara Women's Friendship Network, Hazara Women for Change and Afri-Auscare (through my work with Community Four)

2. working as a production coordinator with Huma Media, a not-for-profit refugee-led community organisation that produces professional audio-visual videos in Dari/Farsi specifically for communities from Afghanistan

3. being an expert advisor with Monash University's Action Grants, an initiative which ran digital grant clinics to support new and emerging communities applying for Victorian government grants to educate multicultural communities about COVID 19

4. being an expert advisor with the Cultural Diversity in Philanthropy Research Initiative, a collaboration of the Centre for Social Impact (UNSW), the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research (University of Technology Sydney), Macquarie Group Foundation, Perpetual, and Philanthropy Australia exploring the state of cultural diversity in philanthropy; resulting in the publication of a report *From Colour Blind to Race Conscious: a roadmap to action diversity and inclusion in Australian Philanthropy*

5. (at the very beginning of the pandemic) creating a digital video library of coronavirus health information focused on 28 languages spoken by smaller numbers of people in Australia, many of whom are part of refugee communities – to enhance government information that was (understandably) focused on reaching the bigger language populations (see news story)

6. providing expert advice to organisations about how they can change their recruitment and onboarding processes to be more inclusive of refugee job seekers and have more understanding of the barriers they experience (see Humans Like Us)

7. being part of a philanthropic giving circle, Impact 100 Sydney, where I volunteer to assess grant applications for a yearly $100,000 grant.

Prior to 2017, I worked for over 20 years in public sector governance – at the NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption and the NSW Ombudsman – scrutinising government actions and developing recommendations for broader systemic change. I worked as an investigator and researcher, which included authoring or editing 18 public reports.

Through my work in the community sector, I have observed a number of key systems weaknesses that create barriers to people from new and emerging organisations to access government and philanthropic funding.

In this submission, I would like to share some of my insights and ideas for practical solutions, in the hope that they might be of value.

What is preventing new and emerging organisations from accessing funding?

To explore ways to ensure grant funding flows to a greater diversity of Community Service Organisations, it may be relevant to understand the barriers that the new and emerging organisations that I have worked with, experience.

I would consider all the refugee-run grassroots community organisations I've worked with to be new and emerging, in the sense that they are all less than 10 years old, have been established by people who have limited connections in or knowledge about Australia, have very little funding and rely heavily on volunteers.

I would also consider them to be trusted community organisations with strong local links. While their diaspora communities might live in different geographic areas, these communities are so tightly knit that the way they operate (and the outcomes they can achieve) reflect the way other place-based initiatives work. For example, according to the 2021 census, there are a little over 40,000 people who identify as being from the Hazara minority ethnic group from Afghanistan (with the vast majority living in South-West Sydney and Dandenong in Melbourne), which is the population of a mid-size country town like Orange NSW.

I have observed 3 specific barriers that these organisations experience and will discuss ideas for overcoming those barriers in each section. They are:

A. Lack of knowledge about sources of government or philanthropic funding.
B. Accessibility issues with grant application processes.
C. Accessibility issues with grant acquittal processes.

A. Lack of knowledge about sources of funding

Refugees have limited networks in Australia. They have had to flee their country in fear for their lives and have no choice around which country will accept them for resettlement. They have no opportunity to plan for their journey, and have to start their lives from scratch when they arrive.

When they start an organisation to help their own communities, it is to address a local need, to help people to whom they are directly connected. They operate in isolation from government and philanthropic ecosystems. The level of government they would have the highest awareness of might be their local Council and possibly their State or Federal MP.

Indeed, at a personal level, although I grew up in Sydney, studied Law at the University of Sydney with people from all over Sydney, and worked in the NSW public service for 20 years, I had no connections to philanthropists and very little knowledge of where small community groups could access government or philanthropic funding. There were no philanthropists in my immediate family network, who were mostly migrants from Malaysia.

By way of contrast, I have observed that well-established community organisations have the corporate knowledge and resources to systematically apply for funding when it becomes available.

Ways to address this

Increase and maintain Federal government knowledge of the community organisation ecosystem, including ethno-specific grassroots groups. Tap into that ecosystem to educate grassroots community organisations or raise their awareness about where they can find funding support for their work.

To have an impact, any education work should be led by people from within the relevant language group. They will be better equipped to:

(a) identify relevant community organisations that might be interested in government information about where to source funding, many of whom have a presence on Facebook and other social media (in languages other than English)

(b) communicate the information using language and methods tailored to the particular audience (this is important because some refugees can have low levels of trust in governments, bureaucracies and authority, both from their experiences in their home countries and their experiences with the Australian immigration system).

One example of this approach is the Service NSW's Multicultural Youth Linker program (more info here), which employs young people from a migrant or refugee background, to provide peer-to-peer support for *other* young people with similar lived experience.

Another example was my experience working with the Melbourne-based community groups Australian Hazara Women's Friendship Network, Hazara Women for Change and Afri-Auscare. The Victorian Government released the PRMC fund to support multicultural communities to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our work delivered culturally-suitable information to reach women in marginalised communities, who primarily spoke languages other than English, and many of whom could not read or write in their own language. They lived isolated lives, with little financial control or access to digital devices, and low digital literacy. To educate them, they needed face-to-face, personalised interactions with a trusted community leader, giving them information in their own language, and using stories that related to their particular lives (eg for communities who commonly eat from shared platters, messaging included ways to do this in ways to prevent the spread).

Positive outcomes that can be achieved

The Afghan-Australian Community and Settlement Support grant is a great example of the positive outcomes that can be achieved when government directly funds small, new and emerging organisations, to enable them to implement their own solutions for the problems in their own communities.

The NSW Refugee Communities Advocacy Network has prepared a report, *Inclusive Settlement Funding Model: The Role of Refugee-Led Organisations in Settlement* (copy attached to this submission), which showcases the effectiveness of distributing funding in this way.

One of their case studies (see p. 7-8) is the work of Huma Media, which I supported during the 2-year grant. Huma Media wanted to tackle a growing mental health and domestic violence crisis within Afghan refugee communities, by starting public discussions around what is considered a private shame. Their approach was to broadcast a beautifully-produced video series featuring warm and personal conversations in Dari/Farsi between a host and trusted experts from within the community (psychiatrists, psychologists, GPs). In all, Huma Media broadcast 8:25 hours of programming, with over 180,000 views on social media channels. The first episode *What is Mental Health?* has had over 44,000 views.

B. Accessibility issues with grant application processes

All of the grants I have applied for follow the same process. There is information about the grant on a website, frequently several large documents to download, an online form (which sometimes allows you to fill in different pages in a different order, and sometimes does not allow you to proceed to subsequent pages until all fields on each sequential page have been filled in), and a registration process to access the online form (requiring an email address). All the information is in English.

In my experience, people from refugee communities face the following barriers to engaging successfully with these processes:

1. difficulties navigating English-language websites and online forms, which are designed for native English readers with good literacy *and* digital literacy

2. access to a digital device and connection to the internet

   - some communities can't afford wifi or data

   - some communities tend to have mobile phones rather than computers; but online written forms are often designed for people familiar with computer-based word processing; they are much easier to fill out and navigate with a keyboard and screen. Imagine how hard it is to type out a 1000-word application on your phone.

3. challenges in writing persuasively in a language that is not your mother tongue – applications from non-English writers are less clearly expressed than those from native English writers, and may not employ techniques that experienced grant writers use

4. not having the time it takes to read all the background material, understand the requirements and prepare written answers – most community groups would work on these applications as a team, which requires even more time and coordination.

In my experience, these barriers can **also** impact:

- older people with low digital literacy and some of whom are not part of the online world at all (I know many in my personal life)
- First Nations people where English is not their primary language
- People with certain disabilities which make it challenging to prepare written material.

People from these groups may be doing really impactful community work but simply cannot participate in the grant application process.

As I said in this Centre for Social Impact media release: *Lack of cultural diversity in Australian philanthropy impacting social outcomes; further research underway | CSI*

> "Online funding application forms can be hard to navigate even if you have digital literacy skills. They are even more overwhelming if you only have a mobile phone, not a computer, and written English is not your strength. People who have limited access to Wi-Fi or data are excluded from these funding pathways altogether. There's a lot of innovative, impactful work being done by small grassroots community groups that funders would discover if those groups were given a chance to talk about their work in their first language or through video or audio recordings."

My experiences are similar to observations made in *Participatory Grant Making: Building the Evidence* (for the Paul Ramsay Foundation), p.32 (highlights added):

> **"Difficulty in ensuring diversity and representativeness**
>
> Communities involved in PGM include socially and economically disadvantaged populations and participants may face barriers including difficulty accessing the internet, language barriers, and time-intensive application processes (Lewis et al., 2022; Purposeful, n.d.; With and For Girls Collective, n.d.).
>
> …
>
> Practitioners seeking to trial PGM approaches may wish to consider the representativeness of the target community they are trying to engage, what challenges these communities may face in terms of access, and how to encourage greater representativeness of communities. Practitioners could engage communities that have remained traditionally unrepresented (With and For Girls Collective, n.d.) or provide stipends to compensate nongrantmakers for their time (GrantCraft, 2018), reimburse travel costs (The Lafayette Practice, 2014), or provide resources to facilitate access e.g., phones with internet access (Purposeful, n.d.). Increasing accessibility will also look different for different communities. For example, the Disability Rights Fund reimburses costs related to their grant reviewers' personal assistants or sign language interpreters. Meetings are also held in physically accessible spaces, and different formats for communication are available (e.g., Braille documents, sign language interpreters) (The Lafayette Practice, 2014)."

That report also made some suggestions for making grant application processes more accessible (p. 34) (highlights added):

> "Addressing opportunity costs for grantees for their involvement: Participants found that the process was time-intensive and required a significant amount of preparation beforehand, presenting a large opportunity cost for participants. There are several ways to address these opportunity costs and support participants' ongoing involvement, such as: o Changes to reduce the burden on participants (e.g., reducing application length) o Introducing a staged process for application (e.g., shorter first application followed by a longer second application

with a nominal grant for participation), and/or o <mark>Providing compensation commensurate to participants' involvement</mark> in the program to support sustainability, long-term engagement, and enthusiasm."

How can a grant application process be more accessible?

In addition to the good ideas in the Participatory Grant Making report, I suggest the following ideas to make the process more accessible for people who communicate more freely in languages other than English (including languages of Indigenous peoples), and who may not be able to read and write, even in their first language.

I acknowledge that all of these changes require additional resources from the grantor. However, I feel this would be a sound investment if it means that the grantor has a broader understanding of what community initiatives are actually being undertaken, and can more knowledgably evaluate which initiatives are having the most impact and should receive financial support. It's in the interests of grantors to uncover and support innovative, impactful work being done by small grassroots community groups, who can create more direct social impact than some larger community organisations who are a step removed from the beneficiaries of their activities.

1. Allow people to submit applications by voice recording or video; or in written languages other than English

The recent rise in social media platforms featuring audio-visual material (eg Youtube, TikTok) demonstrates the popularity of communicating using these means.

If an applicant could submit an application, either written or by video, in their first language, with the grantor covering the cost of translation, this would remove yet another barrier.

To make the process even more accessible, the grantor could also communicate the questions/requirements in audio-visual form. However, the grantor might still communicate the questions/requirements in written form, but could accept answers provided in a different form.

A great example of this approach is the recent Disability Royal Commission, whose website at the time said:

> Anybody can make a submission. A submission can be submitted in any way you feel comfortable – by telephone, email, video or through our website.

The website also had a video, in addition to very simple-to-read website text, inviting people to make a submission. The current Submissions page also has a "listen" button so that you can listen to the page using ReadSpeaker webReader.

In recognising that people might find it hard to start a submission, the Royal Commission did offer some questions for people to think about, but people were not required to answer any or all of the questions.

2. Allow people to send handwritten applications to a postal address

This would make the application process accessible to people without access to digital devices that can do word processing. I acknowledge that information about grants is largely distributed in written, electronic form nowadays, however word of mouth is very powerful, particularly amongst refugee communities. This way you could hear about an opportunity, look at the website on your mobile phone but handwrite an application and send it in, without having to access a computer with internet access, a printer or the ability to log into an online form multiple times.

3. Provide a copy of the questions in an online application form in a downloadable format (eg Word, pdf)

Because small community groups are usually run by unpaid volunteers, many grant applications are joint efforts. So for those groups that *do* have computers and sufficient digital literacy, any tool that helps save them time in preparing the answers jointly, will help.

For example, for some online forms, the first pages might all be administrative details requiring the checking of boxes, with the 3-10 substantive questions (eg what is your project; who will it help) on a later page. For some forms, you have to fill in all the first pages before you can even access the questions on a later page. One person might be best placed to fill in the administrative details, but others might need to work together to answer the substantive questions. To facilitate this process, and to meet tight deadlines, I have had to navigate forward using dummy data, then copy and paste the substantive questions into a Word or Google Doc, so that others in the team can work on those answers (contributing their specific knowledge). When the work is done, I then copied and pasted the answers into the form. Having all the questions in a downloadable form saves a lot of time and helps collaboration.

Of course, allowing applications to be *submitted* using Word or something similar would also make things easier for smaller applicants.

4. Provide community organisations with grant-specific support and capacity building around writing an application

This is an idea from Monash University's Action Grants initiative, which offered new and emerging communities applying for Victorian government grants (to deliver COVID-19 health messages to multicultural communities) advice and support through digital grant clinics. As their website describes:

> "The digital grant clinics were born out of the experience of researchers at Action Lab working closely with multicultural communities in Australia and overseas. We saw the funding opportunities made available by the state government for local organisations but noticed the challenges faced by new and emerging communities in putting forward bids for these funding programs.

> When the Victorian Government's Department of Fairness, Families and Housing (DFFH) announced the MCOP grants scheme in September 2021, Action Lab offered to support individuals and organisations thinking of applying. At 5 days' notice, 60 applicants turned up to these clinics, exceeding all expectations! Due to this overwhelming demand and based on requests from the DFFH, we decided to design a digital grant clinics model that can be set up for future grant programs."

These are different from generalised training sessions, occasionally provided by local councils, that explain the grant application process and give general tips on how to write a successful application.

The key difference is that a bespoke grant clinic would be provided *as part of the grant application process itself*, to help give potential applicants specific, expert and tailored guidance around that particular grant, what the grantor was aiming to achieve and also help the applicant determine whether or not their activities were, or could be, aligned.

C. Accessibility issues with grant acquittal processes

While these are similar to the issues associated with grant applications, the solutions are somewhat different, because the purpose of each process is different.

Like grant applications, most grant acquittals require a final report to be written in English, which answers specific questions, and is provided at the very end of the grant period.

In my experience, people from refugee communities face the following challenges:

1. difficulties navigating and understanding English-language contracts, forms, templates and other information relating to acquittal (which are designed for native English readers with good literacy), and literacy difficulties with written English, which can lead to poor quality acquittal reports

2. access to a digital device and connection to the internet
   - some communities can't afford wifi or data
   - some communities tend to have mobile phones rather than computers; but acquittal reports are usually designed for people familiar with word processing using a computer (more akin to a typewriter than a telephone)

3. not having the time it takes to properly understand all the contractual and background material.

These barriers also create an additional barrier to small organisations applying for a grant in the first place. Standard reporting processes – that almost always require written answers in English – commonly present an unwieldy administrative challenge. This is time that the organisation has to divert from core operations – helping people in their community.

Grant acquittals are about ensuring that funding has been spent consistently with what was promised. But funders have other ways of evaluating this.

As I said in the Centre for Social Impact [media release](#) (referred to above):

> "Funders could consider different ways of understanding how their funds are being used. Something as simple as using an interpreter and asking questions in a 30-minute conversation could save these smaller organisations precious hours that they can instead use to help their communities."

How can a grant acquittal process be more accessible?

1. Build relationships with the funded organisation

In my view, grantors could invest time and resources into building their relationship with the organisations they fund, so they are more embedded in, or have a better understanding of, the day-to-day operations of those organisations. In some ways, it could keep organisations more accountable if the grantors dropped in for a site visit – to see how things were going – once a month, for example. In the 30 years I've worked, I've found the best way to elicit truthful information is through conversations.

As discussed in the NSW Refugee Communities Advocacy Network's report, *Inclusive Settlement Funding Model: the Role of Refugee-Led Organisations in Settlement* (copy attached, p. 37), refugee-led organisations "do not have formal bureaucratic structures" but this "does not mean lack of accountability. In fact, the team management model … intensif[ies] the need for accountability because all team members are accountable, and no transaction could be carried out without the knowledge and approval of all team members… [I]n refugee-led organisations the human relation approach to management dominates."

If grantors better understood how small organisations actually functioned, they could more effectively evaluate the social impact of their funding, during the whole life of the funded activities.

2. Allow acquittals to be provided in different modes

To help with the administrative burden of writing an acquittal report, one idea is to allow organisations to be interviewed and verbally answer the questions required. A further help would be to enable people to answer the questions in their first language, by using an interpreter. An interview method would enable the grantor to clarify what the question is asking, which could elicit more illuminating and relevant answers.

Grantors could also allow the acquittal to be provided by video. For example, I recently heard from Monash University's Action Lab (who ran the Action Grants initiative) about a video-based acquittal pilot for a multicultural events grant in Victoria, using a digital tool called Kuento.

A number of the people involved were able to speak about their experiences in their first languages. One person had attended an event (funded by the grant) and could talk about what they enjoyed and why it was important for their community.

In this case, the organisation arranged for the translation. However, one way grantors could make a video acquittal process even more accessible would be to fund an English translation or have members of staff who are fluent in the language of the community group/s.

It was observed by the multicultural organisations that a video acquittal provided an opportunity for the communities to share their cultural values from their perspectives. It was also perceived to be a highly visual form of 'evidence' of the impact their organisations are making.

Further information

Thank you for holding this consultation and for the opportunity to contribute. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you would like any further information. My collaborators at Monash University and the NSW Refugee Communities Advocacy Network are also happy to be contacted.

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