Small grants offer a great way to drive experimentation and stimulate action on public health at grass roots level.

AstraZeneca launched Step Up! in 2018 in partnership with the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF). It provides grants of up to $10,000 to non-profit organisations focused on youth health and non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

The aim is to help them Step Up! by trying new approaches, addressing wider audiences or moving to a greater scale. Most of the programmes have featured youth education, from mental and sexual health to wider NCD risk behaviours, often using community volunteers to carry the messages to their peers.

Thirteen grants were made in the first year – mainly to African organisations - and sixteen in the second year with a broader global spread. The number of applications almost doubled as the programme got better known.

Many recipients were new charities operating on very limited budgets and with small, largely volunteer, teams. For several the Step Up! grants were transformational.

Such small organisations can act nimbly to react to challenges and opportunities. One dropped its development of a health app preferring to invest in extending its work across three universities rather than one. Others have engaged with government and health authorities to advance the youth health agenda; with three working with government agencies to update guidance, and two with new partners on developing referral pathways. All have looked outwards to find partnerships to assist their development further.

The feedback that we have received also reveals some of their challenges.

What are we learning from Step Up! grant recipients?

The first impact reports often revealed a very low level of knowledge about NCDs among their target groups, which surprised some of the youth workers and caused them to build more basic education into their work.

‘U-Tena has learnt that NCDs appears to be a totally new thing’

U-Tena (Kenya)

Some practical challenges were common, such as the need to build flexibility into project schedules to allow for shifting timeframes or for changes into local school curricula.
There was also a need to develop negotiation and partnership skills to enable them to work more effectively with community-based partners or, for example, to find spaces in busy school timetables.

All of the grantees planned to expand their activities, in a variety of thoughtful ways. These ranged from higher level advocacy, to writing their work up in an academic study, to engaging the Ministry of Health to make their programme more sustainable.

For some, working with young people has been a new and rewarding experience, showing them the talents they can offer as well as the challenges that they face.

‘By using social media, young people can engage with different communities and share targeted messages and information about NCD key risk factors and interventions.’
Breast Care International (Ghana)

‘It just takes one person to create change’.
FUMSA (Uganda)

What have we learned from the process?

Working with new and sometimes tiny organisations can be time-consuming – especially validating their non-profit status in order to release funds. CAF’s guidance on setting up procedures will undoubtedly make it easier for them to attract funding in the future.

Providing funds directly to smaller organisations allows greater community impact, but timings need to be flexible.

The grantees are often ‘social entrepreneurs’ who, despite the small scale of their organisations, can still effect change and influence policy. They experience similar challenges and have much to learn from each other.

Small grants programmes like Step Up! represent an effective way for companies to expand the reach of philanthropic work and play a key role in supporting the development of new, flexible and dynamic organisations, which often struggle to obtain funding.

To find out more about Step Up! please visit https://www.younghealthprogrammeyhp.com/step-up-grants.html

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