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Community-scale climate funding in the Torres Strait Islands

Despite exacerbating climate and environmental challenges, there is little funding reaching the Torres Strait Islands, and communities face barriers to accessing wider climate finance, as current funding mechanisms are often complex, slow, and misaligned with local needs.

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Background

Climates is a not-for-profit organisation which supports community-led climate initiatives across the Australia-Pacific region. The organisation's vision is an empowered Australia-Pacific that is resilient to climate change. In pursuit of this vision, Climates works in collaboration with its partners across the region in support of projects which realise local visions of climate change mitigation and adaptation.

In 2020, Climates commissioned research on small-scale climate finance, identifying a critical gap for direct, unrestricted grants to local community groups in the Pacific Islands. The research came about in response to several requests for support from Climates' Pacific partners in need of small-scale donations to support local climate projects. Extensive consultation with small organisations and community groups revealed that traditional funding mechanisms often involve significant bureaucratic hurdles, complex reporting requirements, and rigid spending rules that make them inaccessible to many community-led initiatives. Further research reinforces these findings, highlighting the challenges of accessing climate finance for small-scale, community-led initiatives, particularly in remote island communities. This includes structural barriers that small and remote communities face in securing climate finance, pointing to the administrative burden, eligibility restrictions, and misalignment with local governance and decision-making processes as key barriers^{3,4}.

In response to identified needs, Climates launched the Micro Grants Program in 2021. The program seeks to bypass the bureaucracy and barriers to traditional climate finance in the region, and provides grants of around \$1,000 in value to support community-driven climate initiatives. Since its inception, the Micro Grants program has supported more than 50 projects across seven Pacific Island nations. Building on the existing Micro Grants program, in 2024 Climates initiated a scoping project to explore the need for and feasibility of a Micro Grants Program in the Torres Strait Islands, ensuring that if a program is pursued, it involves local stakeholders and reflects local knowledge and perspectives.

Research Approach

The research methods included interviews with local community leaders, stakeholders, and experts, as well as a desktop review of existing funding available to small-scale climate projects. Interviews were carried out with local communities across Bamaga and Seisa located in the Northern Peninsula Area of the mainland of Australia, as well as Waiben (Thursday Island), Kulkalgal Nation (Central Torres Strait Islands).

Interviewees included

- Community members including faith group members and medical professionals
- Northern Peninsula Area Regional Councils (NPARCs)
- Torres Strait Island Regional Council
- Torres Strait Regional Authority
- Gur A Baradharaw Kod Sea and Land Council Torres Strait Islander Corporation

The research sought to answer the following research questions

- What are the specific needs and priorities of communities in the Torres Strait Islands regarding small-scale funding for climate initiatives (mitigation and/or adaptation)?
- What funding is currently available for climate initiatives in the Torres Strait Islands, and how could a grant program complement or improve upon existing options?
- If a grant program is pursued, how can funders ensure it is culturally appropriate and/or accessible to communities?
- If a grant program is pursued, who are the key local stakeholders that should be involved in administrative processes such as disseminating grant information and evaluating grant applications?

¹ Victor, A. (2020). Efficacy of unrestricted community-based small-scale finance (micro-grants) in the Pacific. Climates. Retrieved from: https://climates.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Achille-Victor_2020_Efficacy-of-unrestricted-community-based-small-scale-finance-micro-grants-in-the-Pacific_Climates-Research.pdf

² Victor, A. (2020). Efficacy of unrestricted community-based small-scale finance (micro-grants) in the Pacific. Climates. Retrieved from: https://climates.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Achille-Victor_2020_Efficacy-of-unrestricted-community-based-small-scale-finance-micro-grants-in-the-Pacific_Climates-Research.pdf

³ United Nations. (2022). Accessing climate finance: Challenges and opportunities for Small Island Developing States. United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLLS). Retrieved from: <https://www.un.org/ohrls/sids%20climate%20financing%20report%202022>

⁴ Climate Action Network Australia, Pacific Islands Climate Action Network, New Zealand Climate Action Network, ActionAid Australia, & Oxfam Australia. (2024). Seizing the moment: A new climate finance goal that delivers for the Pacific. ActionAid Australia. Retrieved from: <https://actionaid.org.au/resources/seizing-the-moment/>

Context and current landscape

The Torres Strait Islands are home to communities with rich cultural knowledge and intrinsic connections to their local ecosystems. However, like many small island communities, they are on the frontlines of climate change. Rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and coastal erosion threaten homes, livelihoods, and cultural heritage. Remote communities are often ill-equipped to respond to the magnitude of these challenges, and often lack access to basic services. In some regions threats to food security are exacerbated by reliance on subsistence agriculture and fishing. Mining activity is also present in some areas, with companies like Rio Tinto and Scarborough operating in regions such as Bamaga and Sesia in the Northern Peninsula Area, further exacerbating local climate and environmental challenges.

Despite exacerbating climate and environmental challenges, there is little funding reaching the Torres Strait Islands, and communities face barriers to accessing wider climate finance, as current funding mechanisms are often complex, slow, and misaligned with local needs.

While awareness of the links between local environmental impacts and climate change is limited in some regions, community-driven initiatives, including those rooted in caring for Country, are strengthening community resilience to both direct and indirect climate impacts. With adequate funding, including support for training and upskilling, more communities could be empowered to drive impactful and locally relevant climate solutions.

Very few climate funding mechanisms are currently available to communities in the Torres Strait Islands. Larger grant programs are available from government, but often come with complex application processes, restrictive eligibility criteria, and long timelines, effectively excluding smaller or resource-limited communities. At the time of writing, very little grant funding comes from philanthropic sources, and the funding available to the region is typically top-down, and prone to inefficiencies and misalignment with local priorities. Larger grants available to the region tend to prioritise scalable projects, often overlooking grassroots, community-led initiatives with significant localised impact. While small-scale funding can play a critical role in supporting grassroots action, communities also need access to larger, long-term funding sources to address structural challenges such as infrastructure resilience, land protection, and food security.

Considerations for grant programs in the Torres Strait Islands

Interviews with community stakeholders highlight that targeted funding, aligned with the needs and priorities of Torres Strait Island communities, can help address the region's unique climate and environmental challenges by supporting new and existing community initiatives which foster resilience. These initiatives can encompass both climate change mitigation and adaptation, acknowledging the interconnected role of both in strengthening community resilience, and span from nature-based solutions and energy infrastructure projects to advocacy, skills development, and training.

In addition to supporting resilience efforts, Torres Strait Island communities have unique cultures, distinct languages, and traditions that are under threat due to globalisation and the climate crisis.

Climate resilience cannot be separated from the protection of cultural heritage, language, and self-determination. Recognising this, funding mechanisms can play a role in supporting initiatives that embed traditional knowledge into climate solutions—whether through education, language revitalisation, or land and sea management practices. For climate initiatives to be truly effective, they must be place-based, culturally responsive, and acknowledge the ongoing impacts of colonisation.

Carrying out a grant program in the region also requires careful navigation of logistical challenges, such as the remoteness of islands, which can impact communication and accessibility. A decentralised program that engages local leaders and organisations in grant administration processes such as disseminating grant information and evaluating grant applications can help mitigate these challenges.

⁵ Nursey-Bray, M., & Palmer, R. (2018). Country, climate change adaptation and colonisation: Insights from an Indigenous adaptation planning process, Australia. *Heliyon*, 4(3), Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2018.e00565>.

⁶ Leonard, S., Parsons, M., Olawsky, K., & Kofod, F. (2013). The role of culture and traditional knowledge in climate change adaptation: Insights from East Kimberley, Australia. *Global Environmental Change*, 23(3), 623–632. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2013.02.012>

Engaging local communities and leaders goes beyond overcoming logistical barriers—it builds trust, accountability, and culturally relevant solutions. It ensures climate initiatives are led by those most affected, strengthening local governance and capacity, and placing decision making authority in the hands of those who know their land, culture, and needs best.

Administrative processes should also be streamlined to reduce barriers for resource constrained communities trying to access funding; simplified application processes, clear eligibility criteria, and accessible language will ensure broader participation and inclusivity.

Recommendations for future climate funding in the region

Reflecting on the research questions, several recommendations are made for establishing effective and culturally appropriate grant programs to the Torres Strait Islands. Although these will inform the expansion of Climates' Micro Grants program to the region, these insights are broadly applicable to any current or future climate funding initiatives.

The Torres Strait Islands face unique logistical challenges that must be considered when designing and implementing climate funding programs. Remoteness, language barriers, and administrative burdens can make it difficult for communities to access and manage grants effectively. Additionally, climate initiatives in the region will be deeply tied to the preservation of culture and knowledge. Ensuring that funding mechanisms align with these realities will increase their impact and sustainability.



To address these considerations, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Improve accessibility through translation – Consider translating grant documents and application materials into local languages and ensuring that information is communicated in culturally relevant ways to overcome language and literacy barriers.
- Support cultural resilience – Ensure that grant criteria explicitly supports projects that preserve culture and promote traditional practices, recognising that climate resilience is intrinsically linked to cultural and environmental stewardship.
- Prioritise education and capacity building – Ensure grant programs are accessible to initiatives that raise awareness about climate change and its local impacts, as well as projects that provide upskilling and capacity-building opportunities for implementing climate mitigation and adaptation projects.
- Provide hands-on training and support – Offer workshops, mentoring, and training to equip communities with the skills needed to apply for, manage, and implement funded projects successfully.
- Simplify application and reporting processes – Reduce administrative burdens by streamlining application forms, using plain language, and offering flexible reporting requirements to ensure communities can access and manage funds effectively.
- Involve local communities and networks – Partner with local organisations to support the dissemination of grant information, assist with applications, and help evaluate and award grants. Key stakeholders which can be considered for involvement include:
 - The Torres Strait Island Regional Council
 - The Torres Strait Regional Authority
 - Gur A Baradharaw Kod Sea and Land Council Torres Strait Islander Corporation
 - Our Islands Our Home, a local climate NGO in the region



Conclusion

This research highlights the potential for a micro grants program to address critical gaps in small-scale climate funding for the Torres Strait Islands. However, insights from this research also indicate that a diverse range of funding types and scales—beyond just micro grants—is needed to support local communities in addressing climate and environmental challenges in the region. As such, the considerations outlined in this report are not only relevant to the expansion of Climates' Micro Grants Program, but all current or future climate funding mechanisms in the region.

Previous success with the Pacific-focused Micro Grants Program demonstrates the value of direct, accessible funding for empowering community-driven climate initiatives. This research reinforces these findings, identifying opportunities to support locally-led climate initiatives which also strengthen cultural knowledge and practices.

Ensuring that funding is accessible, culturally appropriate, and aligned with local values and priorities is essential to breaking down barriers and empowering communities to lead their own climate solutions. By integrating these principles, climate funding, including both small- and large-scale funding, can be equitable, effective, and responsive to the unique needs and strengths of frontline communities.

