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Making the Cut: Exploring Application Evaluation and Programme Accessibility in Embassy-based Small Grant Schemes

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Abstract Embassy-based small grant schemes provide opportunities for local actors to achieve development and human security functionalities that are locally valued but may otherwise go unaddressed; however, accessing these funds is highly competitive, with only a fraction of applicant claims being successful and resulting in funding. This qualitative study explores the factors behind successful grant-seeking from the perspectives of grant scheme managers and evaluators. It explores how accessing small grant schemes is mediated by a system of practices and preferences at both the personal and programme level. The study highlights how some processes and patterns inherent in small grant schemes can result in capital-rich actors being more successful, counter-normative to the inclusive aims of such grant programmes; however, interviews also highlight an awareness of these barriers by grant programme staff, and indicate a number of practices to enable greater accessibility. Interviewees report that local actors who are able to construct effective narratives can compensate for disparities in other social and cultural capital.

Keywords: capability approach; grant aid; human security; field theory; securitization

Introduction

The development potential of small grant schemes (SGS) lies in their ability to catalyse development and improve human security by creating opportunities for bottom-up, recipient driven development via small financial grants. SGSs are a niche tool that evades the criticisms of top-down or merely participatory approaches – the former for creating a disconnect between programme objectives and beneficiaries needs, and the latter for potentially minimizing local involvement to a tokenistic component (Aguilar-Støen and Hirsch, 2017; Cleaver, 1999; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; David and Tenkon, 2015). By contrast, SGSs can ensure local actors not only participate in development, but design and direct projects themselves. They target the sort of bottom-up actors who may have the motivation and skills to address human security or development issues in their communities, but simply lack the funding to achieve their goals (Cleaver, 1996; 1999). Connecting local

actors with the financial capital enables them to achieve locally valued development goals. The question, however, is how accessible and inclusive are such schemes? This article examines these issues of grant access and gatekeeping via experiences and perspectives of individuals who manage SGSs based at donor country embassies and high commissions.

While SGSs are an idealistic alternative to top-down development strategies, they are still eyed with scepticism by some funders and are not without drawbacks (See: Lentfer, 2015; Sriskandarajah, 2015). Directly funding local actors is risky, thus donors ensure SGSs are highly selective, rife with prophylactic evaluation processes, all resulting in a very competitive (and potentially exclusionary) process. Numerous barriers make accessing funding via an SGS a difficult or even impossible for those capital-poor actors who may be most in need of support (Holm, 2018). The main advantage of SGSs is the capacity to empower smaller, capital-poor actors; however, practices of such funds are crafted to ensure accountability, often at the expense of accessibility. Herein lies the challenge for fund managers and administrators.

This article explores how the practices and processes inherent in embassy-based small grant schemes affect accessibility and SGS participation by smaller development actors. Interviews with SGS administrators and staff reveal that systems of preferences, practices, and processes influence which local actors and projects make the cut, overcome barriers and gatekeeping, and receive funding. Using a conceptual framework based on the capability approach, human security (HS), securitization, and field theory, this article explores the accessibility in grant schemes from perspective of those managing or administering small grant schemes themselves. It does not evaluate of SGSs in terms of achieving specific development goals, but provides a critical examination the role of SGSs in expanding the capabilities of local actors to engage in development activities and work towards self-defined development and human security goals.

Conceptual framework

This research employs a conceptual framework that draws on several theoretical and conceptual components to understand how SGSs function to facilitate the expansion of development and human security capabilities. Firstly, the capability approach provides a normative evaluative framework for reflecting on issues of agency and local needs. Secondly, human security provides an inclusive and actor-relevant paradigm for understanding critical development needs and insecurities. Thirdly, bottom-up securitization is employed as an analytical heuristic for understanding how needs are communicated and claims interpreted. Finally, Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' of field, capital, and habitus help situate and describe inter-actor relations and the relative capacity of actors to achieve their goals. This section introduces these components and their function in the analytical framework.

Human security as a capability

The concept of human security, largely born out of the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report, shifts the focus of security from states to individuals and communities (UNDP, 1994). HS's core is the idea that underdevelopment and security are linked, and insecurity at the highest levels is not separate from insecurities perceived and experienced by individuals. Issues as broad as good governance and access to health-care become as fundamental to security as interstate conflict. However, as Liotta (2002, pp. 474–475) notes, whenever we engage with issues of security we must also ask: Security from what, security by whom, and security achieved through which means? These value-laden questions, requiring an understanding of what insecurities exist from the perspective of those who are themselves insecure. Understanding the role of values and preferences in the pursuit of human security can be aided by reflecting on Amartya Sen's capability approach.

The capability approach is a normative evaluative framework that prioritizes the ability of individuals to achieve the things they value by expanding freedoms and opportunities. The fundamental units of this approach are *functionings* and *capabilities* (Sen, 1999). Functionings are the kinds of beings or doings that an individual may value. Capabilities are the freedoms and capacities that enable individuals to achieve various functionings. The classic example for distinguishing these terms is that of a starving child and a fasting monk. Eating, fasting, and starving are all functionings, however, fasting is fundamentally different from starving because it is a choice. The monk exists in a position of greater security as he retains the capability of eating. Individuals' security needs are varied and depend on their context, thus, approaches to achieving HS must reflect peoples' real needs and values regarding functionings.

Not all functionings are equally valued or achievable by everyone. There have been attempts to codify universal capabilities lists to supplement to Sen's framework (Alkire and Black, 1997; Clark, 2002; Nussbaum, 2000; 2003; Robeyns, 2003). However, Sen (2004, p. 78) has been sceptical of predefined lists, arguing that they inhibit participation. An inclusive perspective on which capabilities are relevant to a context ensures a space for individual values. The opposite results in proposed paths to development and security that may be undesirable to those in need. For example, regarding economic security, De Janvry and Sadoulet (2000) point to a danger for funders to favour approaches too focused on singular economic sectors, such as agriculture, thus failing to address the multi-dimensional aspects of poverty. Similarly, Bebbington (2005, p. 946) cautions that some aid schemes target only a segment of the population, such as the middle-poor, leaving the most chronically insecure behind. Bendaña (2006, p. 12) notes how these problems emerge when funders and experts decide both the diagnosis and the remedy for development problems. Thus, the capability approach insists that people be empowered to pursue functionings that are relevant to their lives and values. It is here that SGSs have the most potential, being recipient driven, allowing actors to answer the questions of security from what, by whom, and through what means.

The relationship between capabilities and HS is exemplified by the Commission on Human Security's (2003, p. 4), which stated that '[h]uman security must also aim at developing the capabilities of individuals and communities to make informed choices and to act on behalf of causes and interests in many spheres of life.' The expansion of freedom and choice – from both an HS and capabilities perspective – should extend to the pursuit of human security goals. As such, SGSs can be tools of empowerment, enabling the expansion of human security capabilities by helping actors to achieve their desired security functionings; however, to do so they must be open and accessible to those capital-poor actors who may be the most insecure.

SGSs provide local actors access to external support for achieving their security and development goals using self-determined strategies. This contrasts with some practices of other international development organizations, who may merely acknowledge local voices while maintaining a largely top-down approach to planning and focus (Bendaña, 2006). As an applicant driven tool SGSs lend themselves to the normative goals of the capability approach in that they provide a path to security and development centred on the expansion of choice and local agency (See: Clark, 2005; Nussbaum, 2003; Sen, 1999; 2005). However, SGSs are also constrained by limited resources, both in terms of bureaucratic needs and financial resources. Competition is fierce. Applicants need to assemble compelling claims about local needs in order to succeed. To understand the nature of such claims, this research heuristically utilizes a bottom-up variant of securitization theory.

Bottom-up securitization and analysing local claims

Bottom-up securitization is a relatively recent adaptation of the theory; however, the traditional concept from the Copenhagen School (CS) has been broadly applied in international relations and security research (See: Balzacq, 2005; 2010; Buzan et al., 1998; Hammerstad, 2012; Salter, 2008; Stritzel, 2007). Securitization is the process by which security is constructed through speech acts (Buzan et al., 1998). The securitization process unfolds thusly: A *securitizing actor* voices a claim that the *referent object* is a threat or is threatened and therefore requires special handling not normally available to the securitizing actor. The *audience* exposed to the securitizing act interprets and considers the credibility of the claim, and if they deem it reasonable, a kind of response or special handling is legitimized.

Normally, securitizing actors make their claims from a position of political or institutional power, leveraging their social and cultural capital behind the securitizing act. Bottom-up securitization, by contrast, is when actors with less conventional forms of power – like grassroots or community actors – are able to use speech acts to leverage their own security values onto a broader or more powerful audience (for examples, see: Adamides, 2012; Hammerstad, 2012; Holm, 2017). Through successful bottom-up securitization, smaller actors can access tools or motivate action that would not have otherwise occurred. In terms of units for analysis, both classical and bottom-up processes are similar; however, the factors that contribute to success of a securitizing act are very different.

Figure 1: Evaluating relative success/failure of bottom-up securitization

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Degree of Success</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are bottom-up actors capable of finding or accessing audiences? • Do bottom-up actors produce an illocutionary statement? • Do audiences perceive them as legitimate speakers of security? • Do audience accept the threat/referent? • Is there behavioural change? • Are the perlocutionary aims achieved or the securitizing actor’s solution accepted? • Are emergency powers or special handling granted? |
|--|---|

*adapted from Salter (2008)

Source: Salter (2008).

Contextual factors determine which security claims are expressed and how successful they are with the audience. Bottom-up actors might try to capitalize on shared understandings of security, or construct a compelling claim around the value of a response. However, social groups may be silenced in certain contexts, and therefore unable to give voice a security claim (Hansen, 2000). Moreover, making a claim alone is not sufficient for success. Effective securitization is audience-centred, context-dependent, and power-laden (Balzacq, 2005, p. 171). The success of a securitizing act depends on the nature of the audience, the claim, the contextual particularities, and the power dynamics between the actor and the audience. The role of the audience in security-making is critical according to Côté (2016), who points to emerging recognition of the co-construction of security between actors and audiences. Effective bottom-up acts occur where actors and audiences share similar notions of security and who constitutes a legitimate security actor. Adamides (2012) suggests that bottom-up securitization is more likely where insecurities have become ‘institutionalised,’ embedded in the social and political field. For example, successful claims about human insecurities are more likely to resonate with audiences holding HS inclusive notions of security.

Securitization functions largely as a heuristic tool in this article. SGSs applicants are a kind of securitizing actor – they use speech acts to compel an audience to respond to a locally valued functioning through a form of special handling. Not all applicants to SGSs will utilize securitizing narratives; however, one expects successful applicants’ claims to be interpreted as more credible or critical in relation to others. Bottom-up securitization helps to conceptualize the interaction between claim-making actors and grant-giving audiences, in addition to being a potential factor in success itself.

SGSs are a potential space for local actors to address their needs, serving as a pathway for actors to make claims that result in special handling. Not all claims will be deemed credible and legitimate by audiences – there are rules, power dynamics, and contextual factors that constrain success. The relative success of the securitizing act can be understood along a spectrum, where utter failure is represented by an inability to access audiences, and success by the achievement of special handling (Figure 1). This spectrum helps reflect on the capacity of SGS applicants as securitizing actors by considering the challenges they face in accessing audiences, communicating their human security needs, and influencing the audience. How far any applicant

proceeds on this spectrum depends on the capital available to the actor, and the nature of the social space where claims are made. The next section illustrates how Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' of field, capital, and habitus help to understand these factors.

Bourdieu's thinking tools – field, capital, and habitus

The work of Pierre Bourdieu has been increasingly applied in international relations, particularly within security studies (for example: Adler-Nissen, 2013; Balzacq, 2005; Bigo, 2008; 2011; Bigo and Martin-Mazé, 2014; Villumsen Berling, 2011; Vuori, 2008). Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' of field, capital, and habitus help in framing and analysing complex actor-audience relations in a conceptually manageable way, allowing a more coherent analysis of complex actor relations (Wacquant, 1989). This section introduces how these concepts relate to the contextual and relational factors that contribute to applicant success or failure.

Field is the social space where relations occur. It is where agents – actors and audiences – are located and compete over access to capital and influence. Fields are not anarchic spaces, but governed by rules inherent to the context, as well as each agent's habitus, dispositions, and capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Nor are fields singular, but often hierarchical and overlapping. In this study, the primary field of interest contains the audience (SGS funders) and numerous competing securitizing actors (applicants); however, other actors (such as governments) exist in related fields and can influence how audiences respond to claims.

The position of agents in the field is determined by their *capital* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). That is, the resources available to any agent that are relevant to the particular field, taking *social*, *cultural*, and *economic* forms (Bourdieu, 1984; 1986). Social capital is the resources that an agent derives from interpersonal networks and relationships, such as contacts or reputation that demonstrate your legitimacy as an actor. Cultural capital (subdivided here into embodied and institutionalized capital) is a person's knowledge, education, and intellectual skills. Agents acquire embodied capital through socialization, culture, or traditions. Institutionalized capital is often credentials, qualifications, or other formalized representations. An example of cultural capital would be familiarity with grant-writing techniques, demonstrable skills for implementation of projects, or NGO credentials. Economic capital is the material resources and assets that an actor possesses. Small grant schemes are then the field in which local actors convert social and cultural capital into economic capital through bottom-up securitizing acts.

Success in securitization depends on both actor and audience capital, values, and rules inherent in the field where securitization is occurring. Bigo and Martin-Maze (2014, p. 4) write,

[t]he ability of any referent object to be threatened depends ... on the societal values that give some kind of importance and meaning to the object under threat. What is deemed insignificant cannot be threatened, for no one cares for it.

For a claim to succeed, it must resonate with the values of the audience, and be backed by capital appropriate to the field. Additionally, success depends on the rules and

practices that exist in the field of SGS – best understood with the concepts of *habitus* and *dispositions*.

Dispositions are the ‘ingrained and mostly inarticulate proclivities and tendencies accumulated through personal exposure and collective history’ whereas *habitus* refers to an agent’s system dispositions and the patterns of action that emerge from (Pouliot, 2013, p. 47). They are factors that influence audiences’ potential inclinations, for example, favouring particular kinds of projects, actors, or forms of capital (for example, accreditation, social connections, or demonstrated experience). The position of actors in the field, their capital, and dispositions or *habitus* influence the way in which interactions play out, reproducing patterns of practice. These concepts are useful in analysing the SGS field, as they help to understand whether grants giving practices expand capabilities or simply replicate processes that favour the same kinds of actor capital and claims.

Social fields and their practices are difficult to describe succinctly, even with a relatively contained field as small grant schemes. As such, this study draws on a previous exploration of SGSs (see: Holm, 2018), which through extensive document analysis identified a number of potential barriers to access that applicants must overcome. That study constructed a typology of barriers inherent in SGSs in terms of the kind of capital needed to overcome them (Table 1). This includes economic capital barriers, such as the need to have existing resources before applying; social barriers, such as the need for existing relationships with funders; cultural barriers, such as the need for NGO accreditation; and other barriers, such as funder preferences and dispositions, or barriers emerging from potential risks of partnership with foreign actors.

Using this typology of barriers as a starting-off point, this article seeks to challenge or confirm their relevance to SGS success, but also to explore their influence from the perspective of the audiences. The next section explains the methods used in this study.

Methods

This article uses qualitative approaches informed by the results of the two previous studies by the author on local actors and embassy-based SGSs. The first study, Holm (2017) provided a detailed comparative case study of local development actors who worked to secure grant funding for local projects, detailing the challenges and strategies they face in doing so. The second study by Holm (2018) presents an inversion of the 2017 case study, examining not the SGS applicants, but instead the formal programme-level frameworks, and constructs a typology of barriers inherent in SGSs that applicants must overcome. These studies, in combination, inform the data analysis and interview questions in this article.

Qualitative methods were chosen due to the limited pool of potential participants, and to enable more detailed analysis regarding themes and informant perspectives (Stake, 1995). This detail-oriented approach is essential when investigating complex

| | Barrier type | Example barriers | Description |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|--|--|
| <i>Applicant Capital Barriers</i> | Economic capital | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Technological barriers ● Incurred financial costs ● Spending restrictions ● Resource evaluations | Barriers that relate to the accessible financial and material assets the applicant, or that occur in the form of restrictions placed on the use of grant funding. (e.g. access to internet, independent funds, etc.) |
| | Social capital | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Previous relationships ● Existing partnerships ● Word-of-mouth calls ● Sources of legitimacy | Barriers that relate to the social networks and relationships that influence the applicants' ability to access grants or leverage for competitive advantage. |
| | Cultural capital | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Language requirement ● Linguistic competence ● Bureaucratic navigation ● Required accreditation or official status ● Criminal record checks ● Reputation or credibility | Barriers that relate to the applicants' ability to successfully interpret programme requirements, communicate local needs, and be recognized as a legitimate actor in the field. (e.g. strong English skills, NGO registration, familiarity with legal language, etc.) |
| <i>Non-Capital Barriers</i> | Funder dispositions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Thematic focus ● Funder preferences or need for risk aversion ● Mismatch of values regarding claims and solutions | Barriers that relate to how preferences and dispositions of actors in the field could impact the acceptance or rejection of specific applications. |
| | Other | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Risk from association ● Encourages NGO-ization ● Dependency building ● Opportunity costs ● Etc. | Barriers or risks that do not clearly fit into any category, such as risks that can be incurred from programme participation. |

Table 1: Capital barriers to access in small grant schemes.

Source: Holm (2018).

and contextual subjects, such as interviewee perspectives and experiences interpreting grant applications.

The study occurred in three phases: *planning*, *collection*, and *synthesis*. The *planning* phase began the construction of a theoretical and analytical framework, the examination of background articles or reports, and the identification of potential cases used for recruitment. A number of criteria informed case selection. Firstly, the grant

programmes should focus on local actors or local development issues. Secondly, the grant system should be primarily applicant driven, relying on local project submissions as opposed to top-down projects. Thirdly, the grant programmes should be sufficiently broad in theme for interpretation through an HS lens. A number of embassy-based schemes were identified within these parameters (Table 2), including the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI); Grant Assistance for Grassroots Human Security Projects (GGP); Norwegian Embassy Grants (NEG); Fund for Local Cooperation (FLC); and United Kingdom Small Grants (UKG).¹

The *collection* phase, from June 2017 to June 2018, involved the recruitment and interviewing of participants. Recruitment began by generating a list of embassies and high commissions in developing countries. These were contacted with a letter of enquiry regarding the status of any SGSs at their mission and a request for the contact information of SGS staff. Those that responded to the contact request were invited to participate in interviews. As was indicated in previous studies on elite interviewing and research involving diplomatic services, access and recruitment was a difficult and participation rates were low (see: Goldstein, 2002; Neumann, 2012; Pouliot, 2013). From hundreds of requests, only 30 individuals agreed to participate in the interview process.

As face-to-face interviewing on a global scale is prohibitively expensive, participants invited to interview over the phone, by Skype, or through an email interview process. Interviews were audio recorded, except in two cases where handwritten notes were taken. Most participants opted for Skype or telephone interviews, however, email interviews preferred by some as it allowed them the opportunity to carefully consider their responses and reply in their own time – this was consistent with Bowden and Galindo-Gonzales (2015) analysis of email interviewing methods. Interviews focused on patterns of practice, project selection, applicant credibility, and balancing local vs funder needs amongst others. Additional questions focused on personal reflections on SGSs and possibilities for programme improvement. Recorded interviews were transcribed and anonymized. Geographic indicators were removed, along with information that could indicate special circumstances unique to a particular diplomatic post. This level of anonymity was key in assuring participants that they could speak freely. Interestingly, after interviews, many participants described the process as cathartic, perhaps because the interview processes allowed them to express frustrations or dissatisfactions with SGS processes or constraints. Indeed, many interviewees indicated varying degrees of satisfaction with how their particular SGSs operated in general, or within their particular context.

The *synthesis* phase of the project consisted of processing the interview data using thematic analysis. Transcribed data was uploaded into qualitative data analysis software

1 Unlike Canadian, Japanese, and Finnish SGSs, Norwegian and United Kingdom small grant approaches do not appear to have a standardized official or an umbrella name used across all embassies or high commissions, thus the acronyms used here are strictly for the purposes of this article.

| Grant scheme | Grant administration | Primary funder |
|---|---|----------------------------------|
| Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI) | Canadian embassies and high commissions | Government of Canada |
| Grant Assistance for Grassroots Human Security Projects (GGP) | Japanese embassies | Government of Japan |
| Norwegian Embassy Grants (NEG) | Norwegian embassies | Government of Norway |
| Direct Aid Programme (DAP) | Australian embassies and high commissions | Government of Australia |
| Fund for Local Cooperation (FLC) | Finnish embassies | Government of Finland |
| UK Small Grants | United Kingdom embassies and high commissions | Government of the United Kingdom |

Table 2: Small grant schemes (SGSs).

NVivo and coded using predetermined and emergent themes. Predetermined themes included patterns of practices, rejection\approval factors, forms of capital, and others relating to barriers (as in [Table 2](#)) or securitization. Emergent themes focused on exceptions to expected behaviour or practice. Finally, the information was synthesized into this article.

Data presentation

As mentioned, this analysis applies a spectrum of success\failure of bottom-up securitization to understand the challenges faced by SGS applicants in successful grant seeking. For the purposes of this article, this spectrum is simplified into three key sections: access to audiences, legitimacy as securitizing actors, and a compelling security claim or narrative. This section presents and discusses the interviewee perspectives on local actor capacities to progress along the spectrum, from initial access to audiences, to the granting of special handling. It does so by firstly, looking at the barriers to audience access and communicating needs. Secondly, it presents barriers related to perceived actor legitimacy and credibility as securitizing actors. Finally, it explores barriers that inhibit audiences from accepting local actor claims and providing grants or special handling.

Audience access and communication

The first hurdles in bottom-up securitization and receiving a SGS grant relate to accessing audiences and communicating one's security or development goals. Throughout the interview process, participants reflected on these issues in a number of ways, primarily in regards to practices surrounding distribution of calls, soliciting proposals, and the capacity to produce illocutionary speech acts.

When asked about procedures for identifying potential partners or soliciting proposals, participants described a range of practices. Most participants pointed towards some form of restricted distribution, intended to balance the number of applications received and streamline processing. Interviewees from all SGS programmes described

processes as occurring in primarily online formats, sometimes in combination with limited distribution through social or interpersonal networks. One NEG participant described their practices thusly:

... in principle, we should have open calls and I think that is also now in the making with the launch of something called '[unintelligible] portal' which is coming. Which is basically more like an interactive tool where organizations and seekers for grants apply there directly online for grants and the ministry and the embassies will respond and conduct the correspondence and everything on the whole process in a specific electronic tool, or online basically.²

The interviewee indicated that the shift away from open calls was (in their opinion) a decision made to control in influx of applications, as well as to shift the burden of grant decision making from embassies to Oslo. A CFLI interview said, '... we do a call for proposal online and so, most of the people that we will reach are people that have access to information technology. We also do presentations, especially in [remote areas].'³ A similar, mixed approach was noted by a UKG interviewee, who recalled distributing grant information, '... in the papers and in social media, and with the forms and stuff that people need to fill.'⁴ Interestingly, participants recognized that online-only systems potentially cut out certain actors, but felt that it was a necessary approach in order to streamline administrative processes.

Other participants indicated a shift away from the open-call model. A UKG participant testified, 'We don't always open a call for bids. Last time a call for bids was open was in [year]. Opening a bidding process allowed us to find contacts, projects that we did not know about.'⁵ They described using open calls as a kind of network building, where new local contacts could be discovered as thematic priorities shifted.

In a similar vein, several Norwegian NEG participants reported using word-of-mouth and informal networking as part of their solicitation process. Two participants relayed experiences where, despite not having a current funding round, they found ways to be available to hear from local actors about their needs. One recalled being in the process of introducing a new development portfolio, saying,

... we were approached by an organization that I didn't know from before and they were working on gender issues. So I thought, let's invite them because we might be changing our portfolio, might be changing our partners ... let's hear what they have to say.⁶

Another described their accessibility thusly:

2 Interview with NEG representative, 2018.

3 Interview with CFLI representative, 2017.

4 Interview with UKG representative, 2018.

5 Email Interview with UKG representative, 2018.

6 Interview with NEG representative, 2018.

So the strategy that I've adopted... is that basically, I've been very clear with people coming what we can and cannot fund. So even before they come for a meeting, not to waste their time. We're always interested in hearing about your projects and if you want to come and tell me about it. Even if we can't fund you, maybe there are other things that we can do together... But I really appreciate it also having people just come to the embassy and talk about their work. Having a listen about what they do and sometimes we can even do things like share their story on a social media platform. Which is nothing compared to funding, but it seems that a lot of people appreciate that embassies are actually willing to listen to what they do.⁷

In these cases, informal or irregular communication was a way of hearing about potential partner needs and building networks for possible future projects; however, it relied on the local actors to initiate unsolicited contact.

Interestingly, a diplomat participant stationed in a country with a politically difficult regime went further, saying informal networks were the only way to safely operate a small grant fund:

We try not to spread the word too much because it's slightly sensitive. But it's a two-way thing. I think many [local actors] know that [our country]... they support different projects and they apply without having any contact with them in advance. That's one way of identifying relevant or not so relevant projects. And the other way is just by being a diplomat. Going out to society, the local civil society. Getting to know people.⁸

Where doing open calls was possibly unsafe, the embassy relied on developing extensive local networks and making oneself available to hear proposals from new or established contacts. By contrast, participants from the Japanese GGP uniformly reported relying on open call models, with none reporting any form of targeted solicitation, informal communication, or opportunities for unsolicited meetings.

In situations where local actors were able to access audiences, there were still several potential barriers for hopeful securitizing actors. These related most commonly to issues of language and communication. Nearly all respondents reported English as the dominant or only language for legal documents, forms, and information in distributed calls. One participant with funding responsibilities in several countries in charge of several countries stated that despite working across three non-English countries, their process was '[o]nly in English. Our embassy doesn't have [local language] speaking personnel, as long as we are located in [other country]... There is no way around that.'⁹ This meant that an applicant must have at least some English to assemble a basic application; however, others indicated they indicated that perfect English communication skills was not essential. Many interviewees reported that many applicants were successful at communicating despite weak English skills. A GGP administrator

7 Interview with NEG representative, 2018.

8 Interview with Anonymous Diplomat, 2018.

9 Interview with NEG representative, 2018.

recounted that some actors were still very capable of demonstrating and communicating local claims. They recalled how ‘one organization, they really did not speak English very well, but still, they know the numbers and they really know what they were talking about ... they really try to be sincere ...’¹⁰ In another interview, an NEG participant noted that when language problems emerged, they

... reach out to our local colleagues. For example if we have an applicant that we’d like to work with and there are problems with the application, we invite them for a meeting and a sit down and help them with the application.¹¹

Those SGS participants with local staff in their offices cited them as resource, both in terms of language and understanding the local context.

One exception to these English dominant systems was an Australia’s DAP interviewee who noted that they had the full range of documents and services available in the local national language. As a result, they received no applications in English. Interestingly, this led to another communication problem in that language norms and narratives could result in applications with ‘[lots of] adjectives and long language’ suggesting that ‘doesn’t always assist an application ... getting straight to the point ... the statistics on vulnerability and why it’s such an important need to meet might grab my attention more.’¹² This situation was somewhat remarkable, with most participants attesting to a lack of local language documents for their missions. That being said, participants generally expressed that weak language skills were more problematic in later stages of SGS participation (such as during reporting or monitoring) and not necessarily a definitive barrier to access.

Perceived legitimacy of local actors

For actors capable of accessing audiences and communicating claims, the next challenge relates to legitimacy and credibility. SGS administrators need to determine whether the organization making the claim or proposing a project is an appropriate, legitimate, and credible actor in the given context. Interviews revealed a broad range of responses across SGSs on these issues, highlighting how complex the field of SGSs can be.

One of the most surprising results related to diverse patterns of practice regarding which kinds of groups typically received funding. Small grant funds ideally target small local actors in order to maximise impact and ownership; however, some of the interview participants indicated that the aim of funding local groups was not always achieved. While some respondents indicated a preference for local groups, other SGS staff suggested it was common to support larger NGOs or actors from developed countries who worked on local level projects.

10 Interview with GGP representative, 2018.

11 Interview with NEG representative, 2018.

12 Interview with DAP representative, 2018.

CFLI respondents described the average applicant as ‘... usually a small, locally based civil society organization’ with another CFLI interviewee claiming local organizations made up ‘... 95% of who receive the funds.’¹³ Another CFLI interviewee stressed the importance of relationships between implementers and beneficiary communities, asking ‘... what is the relationship of the organization to the community? Do they already know the people in the community? Have they worked with them before? Or do they just want to come ... like the saviours.’¹⁴ FLC and DAP respondents echoed similar responses in that community legitimacy was important and not something often found with international NGOs.

Other interviewees noted that non-local NGOs or NGOs based outside of the target country also received grants. Interviewees from Japan’s GGP and Norway’s NEG suggested that the focus of the project was more important than the implementer. An NEG participant shared that ‘... for one of the school reconstruction projects we’ve done too, we did a selection process and that was a Norwegian NGO that won that bidding. They are based in Oslo. They don’t have a local office here.’¹⁵ Similarly, a GGP interviewee recalled funding non-local partners as well, sharing ‘... I work on the water project in partnership with an Italian NGO.’¹⁶ Ensuring indigeneity of the implementer was not always a major consideration from respondents when compared to project impact.

Ensuring credibility was a major concern for all respondents, playing a key role in selection. One DAP respondent recalled a local hospital sending in an application, with an Australian doctor as the contact person:

So basically, the application stood out. And it did help that he’s an Australian and we know him, being an Australian for our various Australian events so you do then talk about it, and you go and have a look. And he shows you around, what’s the current situation. So it does have an extra [part], that you know who is applying, but initially the application just stood out.¹⁷

The need for the project, in this case, was evident; however, the credibility of the applicant also played a role. Trust and reference checking was mentioned by numerous participants. Additionally, several interviewees recalled sharing informal ‘blacklists’ between embassies of applicants who were regarded as a risk. A few participants shared stories of negative experiences where scammers and fraudulent organizations targeted their fund.

Some participants noted NGO credentials as a key indicator of a credible or qualified candidate. GGP participants uniformly listed NGO registration as an essential

13 Interview with CFLI representative, 2017.

14 Interview with CFLI representative, 2018.

15 Interview with NEG representative, 2018.

16 Interview with GGP representative, 2018.

17 Interview with DAP representative, 2018.

requirement. However, a CFLI interviewee also noted that sometimes even certain qualified applicants may be considered risky or illegitimate, recounting

... on paper you can fund local governments. To be quite honest, because of the mistrust that we have in general, not just the Canadian embassy, but in general public has towards government here ... we usually don't fund government projects.¹⁸

Another participant recalled bending the formal requirements around registration or status in a given context, saying

... it depends on the country where you are. How stringent are the laws for establishing a collective. And you know, in [previous CFLI posting] it was a bit more flux work with associations there that were loosely based collectives that we were able to do projects with them.¹⁹

In this case, evaluations for credibility and legitimacy were done in context.

Interestingly, GGP and DAP participants reported that often final decisions on projects were sometimes reserved until a site visit occurred and actors evaluated in person. Site visits were described as being useful in determining the credibility of the project and the implementer, with a DAP participant sharing, 'if you go and dig deeper and you get a chance to meet them, obviously face to face contact often tells you a lot.'²⁰ A GGP participant recalled a story where a site visit revealed a suspicious applicant:

... sometimes, they try to be kind of sneaky ... they hired some people. You know, like [unintelligible] people who can speak good English or something. And then, they really try to [promote] everything. They [said], 'hey, this school really needs help' and everything. But then when I ask them, 'hey, do you know when they fund this school?' and they have no idea about it. And I ask them, 'do you know how many students does this school have?' and then they still really didn't know. So I feel like, okay, they kind of became [a] liar, and I really didn't appreciate it.²¹

In this case, after visiting the site they became intensely sceptical about the applicant and their claims. Other participants similarly reported that personal impressions and preferences played a role in selection. A DAP staffer said, 'I do really like ... the headmasters at schools. I do have a soft spot for them'²² indicating that these types of applicants are looked upon favourably. Similarly, a CFLI respondent attested to a personal preference to take risks on smaller, lesser-known organizations, sharing that 'as a risk taker, we are willing to do it ... we establish a track record and we also build civil society by doing that. By giving the chance to a bigger number of organizations to

18 Interview with CFLI representative, 2018.

19 Interview with CFLI representative, 2017.

20 Interview with DAP representative, 2018.

21 Interview with GGP representative, 2018.

22 Interview with DAP representative, 2018.

be active.’²³ They felt that some actors deserved a chance to prove their credibility and that the smallness of CFLI grants enabled them to take risks on less established actors. These kinds of comments suggest that despite rule-based frameworks for evaluating applications, personal preferences on the part of individual SGS staff do play a small role in gatekeeping and successful grant seeking.

Audience acceptance of claims

Even in those cases where a local actor is capable of accessing audiences and is deemed credible or legitimate, the success of a claim is not guaranteed. In the face of multiple competing claims, successful actors must be exceptionally compelling and their claims should resonate with the dispositions of their audiences. The mere act of making an application is not enough to guarantee success: Audiences need to be convinced that the applicant and the project will be impactful and worth the risk.

During the interview process, participants revealed that success applications depend on an array of factors and a careful process of evaluation. For example, CFLI participants reported using a points-based system and multiple evaluators to make final decisions. Others, like GGP participants, reported a process that relied heavily on the staff making arguments to send particular projects up a chain of command in the mission, then to the ministry in Tokyo. When asked about the experience of denying an applicant, a GGP staffer relayed the following account:

Okay, so [for example], development application about ... [a] shelter for widows and also genocide survivors. ... I thought this shelter program was very important, but it got rejected by my boss. And then, it felt like, I don't know. It's difficult to prioritise. If my boss's priority is different from mine, and then, it can be an issue.²⁴

Other GGP participants reported similarly that the preferences of persons up the hierarchy strongly influenced which projects were accepted. This perspective was unique to GGP interviewees.

Some aspects of selection were the same across all SGSs. For example, every participant indicated they were required to select projects that fit a set of thematic priorities that change from year to year. An FLC participant suggested that successful applications ‘... should be strongly related to the themes of the call and the priorities mentioned in the call.’²⁵ A Norwegian NEG respondent stated,

we have governance, clean energy, and education as the three pillars, and then gender equality is on the side. So if someone contacts and not within any of that, it is so unlikely that we will be able to have any money to support that so I would say no.²⁶

23 Interview with CFLI representative, 2017.

24 Interview with GGP representative, 2018.

25 Email Interview with FLC representative, 2018.

26 Interview with NEG representative, 2018.

Participants generally reported that successful applicants demonstrated they clearly understood the call for proposals and aligned their project accordingly.

Interestingly, some participants indicated that applications could be too finely tuned. One DAP interviewee reflected on this, lamenting

And to be honest, I've read so many dodgy ones that it's pretty easy to pick up on them. A lot of the dodgy ones have really flowery text and big development sort of words, but we don't want those in DAP.²⁷

They felt that too-perfect responses might indicate that the actor was too experienced to represent the target group of DAP.

Questions about what poor applications or unconvincing claims look like yielded interesting results. One commonality shared by many of the respondents was the emphasis on need and the appropriateness of the response. A CFLI participant wrote of unsuccessful applications as follows:

There are two common problems encountered when dealing small local organizations: they don't understand Canada's perspectives and include parts to a project that support their own points of view, but that would be considered harmful from a Canadian perspective; they are unsure about how they hope to achieve their goal.²⁸

The ability of actors to show an understanding of donor country values and priorities was uniformly reported as important. One GGP interviewee suggested that their own selection process was guided by two other principles, saying '... GGP focuses on the basic human needs and human security concept.'²⁹ The promotion of human security has long been part of Japanese foreign policy. Another GGP staffer also suggested promoting Japan's brand was sometimes a factor, recalling of one grant receiver, '... [recipients] really try to make sure that the Japanese sign becomes very visible, so I really appreciate it.'³⁰ Ensuring possibilities for self-promotion was common across all SGSs.

Ensuring a geographic spread or reaching a more marginalized group was considered important. 'Sometimes we might decide to look into locations of these projects and select to fund may be the one in the remote area or disadvantaged group,' said one FLC interviewee.³¹ Similar sentiments were echoed by other participants, especially those responsible for large or multiple countries or regions. The ability to demonstrate project sustainability in terms of impact or continuation was universally touted as a factor in grant success. A GGP interviewee questioned,

27 Interview with DAP representative, 2018.

28 Email Interview with CFLI representative, 2018.

29 Interview with GGP representative, 2018.

30 Interview with GGP representative, 2018.

31 Email Interview with FLC representative, 2018.

how [are] they are going to sustain service delivery in the community where they have proposed the project? ... [s]how us a justification and ... show also that the resources that they have available internally or externally for project support.³²

Multiple informants indicated the need to see a plan for continuation of services.

Some participants indicated preferences regarding solutions to insecurities. Most participants viewed workshop proposals as ineffective, preferring either concrete or innovative projects. Interestingly, this could incorporate very simple or complex responses. A DAP interviewee gave an example of building a student hostel at a remote school to provide safe accommodation and reduce risk of sexual violence.³³ This was a simple solution to a clear and serious problem. A more complex example was given by a CFLI staffer:

So one we did with the climate change, they were training women to use improved stoves ... within the context of the project, they sensitised the women about using improved stoves ... how using other stoves and not the improved one will bring out smoke, carcinogenic acids on the smoked fish, and when you eat it, you have health implications. ... Then after that, they will do a trial; help them to use a stove for the women to see ... So in the context of that, they will help some youth to learn how to build the stove, so that at the end of the project, there will still be production going on in the community.³⁴

This project represented a kind of ideal described by many respondents: innovative, multi-level, cost effective, and highly visible. By contrast, GGP respondents indicated a preference for simpler proposals – usually purchasing or construction agreements – emphasizing the desire for concrete, achievable, high impact, and high visibility projects. A nearly universal requirement was a kind of sustainability plan.

Every interviewee was asked about what differentiates how successful applicants communicate and present their claims versus less-successful ones. Participants pointed towards actors' ability to assemble a kind of complete narrative package. An NEG representative said,

... you look for some solidity in the application itself. Is there a coherence between goals, purpose, indicators, you know the whole theory of change? If they present such [a] logical framework ... a clear connection between activities and goals.³⁵

A CFLI staffer echoed

we wanted to look at whether the case made for the project, the justification made for the need for this project ... how convincing their arguments and logics are, and also trying to see whether that fit with the priorities the CFLI has for this year.³⁶

32 Interview with GGP representative, 2018.

33 Interview with DAP representative, 2018.

34 Interview with CFLI representative, 2018.

35 Interview with NEG representative, 2018.

36 Interview with CFLI representative, 2018.

An FLC participant noted this was not necessarily connected to language or professionalism, but a kind of linguistic competence in connecting all the dots and assembling a case:

... [t]he applications coming from [the other country] were very high quality, but in many of those you could see that there was kind of a professional NGO application writer writing [them]. But, what we realised, that that doesn't really help many applications. Some applications written with much worse level of English, much less understanding of developmental vocabulary were much better focused and answering to real need of certain groups of population for example. So, it is really this clear understanding of your group of people's problem, understanding why Finland wants to help with that, and then having very focused program or activities which will help to solve or improve the situation.³⁷

This ability to communicate the seriousness of needs, appropriateness of solutions, and value to funders was repeated by most participants. Interviewees treated imperfection or lack of professionalism forgivingly, testifying to an understanding of capital disparity between local actors and major NGOs. Some participants indicated that especially promising applicants were sometimes given advice on how to improve proposals; however, this kind of rejection of professionalism was not universal, even within the same grant scheme. Another FLC interviewee recalled the following:

I can't remember the details of the project, but it got the best score in the initial evaluation and made a very strong impression on me – it was very professional. However, my superior thought otherwise and wanted me to re-evaluate since she was impressed by another application that had been presented to her in person by the applicant. I felt the pressure to evaluate differently – so I did, after protesting without success.³⁸

This highlights that there are always a number of factors at play and success or failure for local actors can sometimes boil down to an issue of accessing the right person at the right time.

Discussion and conclusions

Based on the range of responses from the interviewees, it is evident that accessing and successfully receiving funds from a small grant scheme depends on a broad number of factors. The typology of barriers developed in Holm (2018) appears highly relevant, corresponding directly to a number of indicators in success/failure highlighted throughout the interviews. That being said, the results of the one-on-one interview format allowed SGS staff to indicate methods or practices they used to help local actors navigate barriers, thus expanding capabilities to a certain degree.

The existence of economic capital barriers was evident. Participants' indicated that SGSs were increasingly switching to centralized or online-only application formats,

37 Interview with FLC representative, 2018.

38 Email Interview with FLC representative, 2018.

suggesting that applicants will always require access to information technology – something that may be prohibitively expensive for many. Additionally, the focus on issues such as project sustainability or continuing internal funding implies that actors with little financial capital may be excluded from the opportunities gained by a one-time grant. Other requirements, like spending restrictions, also indicate similar barriers.

Interestingly, some respondents noted that calls for proposals were still sometimes communicated through conventional newspapers or interpersonal networks, suggests a recognition of this economic-capital gap; however, this same word-of-mouth practice highlights the importance of social capital for local actors. In a normative sense, who-you-know should not dictate your capabilities. Without being appropriately connected in the field, many smaller actors may miss out information regarding SGS opportunities. While controlled distributions are understandable administratively – SGSs may otherwise be overwhelmed with applications – they do highlight a serious social capital gap. On the positive note, several participants had indicated that they made purposeful efforts to identify new potential partners and help build up the social capital of smaller actors through their SGS activity. This is particularly important, as interviewees uniformly reported reference checking with other embassies as part of their selection process. It is commendable that some interviewees understand their role in building social and cultural capital as well as financial.

On a related issue, interviews revealed some inconsistency of practice regarding evaluating actors' credibility and legitimacy. Results indicated that some SGS staff evaluated claimants on a case-by-case basis, using a variety of indicators and preferences to make decisions. Capital in the form of reputation or credibility was cited as highly important, but there was a great deal of flexibility in appraisal. The circulation of informal blacklists was noteworthy, particularly as a kind of negative capital. Additionally, the fact that non-local NGOs sometimes receiving funding in a competitive process might suggest that cultural capital in the form of indigeneity of the actor is not necessarily an asset or a requirement. SGSs could better improve local capabilities by limiting themselves to local actors, despite the additional risks.

Responses regarding professional NGOs and non-professional grassroots groups were diverse. Some indicated cultural capital barriers to the expansion of local capabilities, as non-local actors may lack cultural capital in the form of professional development training and grant writing skills. However, several respondents suggested that they tried to focus less on professionalism and seeing the right buzzwords, and more on the details of project aims and potential impacts. There was no evidence to show that practices are deliberately exclusive to professional NGOs, in fact, several participants preferred to ensure partnerships with smaller, more grassroots actors. Anecdotally, those participants who seemed to enjoy the SGS components of their work more seemed to be more willing to tolerate less polished or professional applications. In general, it appears that language skills were less important to success than the ability of applicants to present a compelling narrative about local needs and solutions. This emphasis on linguistic competence is very much akin to a securitizing act, where a

threat and solution is laid out, making the case for special handling. Appropriateness of responses and matching funder needs were clearly the top priority for all interviewees.

Evidence from several interviews suggests that dispositional more than capital-based barriers played a role for many participants in accepting local claims. Some dispositional factors were clear, such as funders thematic priorities listed in calls, but others were made evident only through interviews. For example, disdain for projects like workshops or seminars and preferences for ‘innovative’ projects. Innovation is, almost by definition, novel and rare. Local actors may not always have an innovative solution, and innovation may not be needed when a conventional solution exists. Human security functionings may be readily achieved through conventional projects.

GGP and FLC participants pointed towards the personal preferences of persons involved in the selection process as being influential, sometimes negatively. CFLI respondents were consistent in pointing towards a points-based committee system in reducing the impact of personal dispositions – the downside being that system requires more embassy staff to commit time to SGS duties. GGP and NEG participants indicated more selection power being found in Tokyo and Oslo. The capacity for persons more removed from the local context to exert influence over the selection process is troubling, shifting more towards a top-down instead of a bottom-up scheme. Local voices may not carry over long distances.

In general, the results confirm the relevance of the typology developed in Holm (2018). Economic, social, and cultural capital all play a role in governing which actors are able to access SGS funds. What was unexpected was the degree to which participants from the same funder testified to different patterns of practice in selection, particularly regarding the room for individual dispositions. Of course, dispositions are mediated by the overlapping fields interviewees exist in. One could imagine a Venn diagram depicting the needs of the funder and those of the recipients – the area in the middle being the legitimate actors and claims. Participants consistently suggested the existence of flexibilities and context-specific practices, making it difficult to pin down any consistent barriers to access across schemes or contexts. The most important and consistent factor across all interviews was the need for local actors to assemble a very concrete claim or narrative, one which very much parallels Liotta’s (2002) security questions: from what, for whom, and by what means. Viewed as bottom-up securitizing acts, security claims need to resonate with SGS audiences’ own security dispositions. Success or failure in accessing SGSs relies on the ability for applicants to show themselves to be a legitimate actor with a very clear narrative or claim.

Clearly, SGSs very much represent a way to expand human security capabilities, although, they remain very competitive and the capital needs make them somewhat exclusive as well. Thus, regarding accessing the opportunity small grant schemes represent, making the cut requires more than a willingness to step onto the field.

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