

EdelGive Foundation



Principle 3

Principle 5



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The fact is, the people behind the scenes – the officers, the staff – were so neglected ... Asking them to deliver impact without supporting their internal capacity is not just unfair; it's systemically damaging.

Naghma Mulla

CEO, EdelGive



About EdelGive Foundation

The [EdelGive Foundation](#), established in 2008, supports grassroots organisations through grants and organisational development support. The foundation began as the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) wing of the Edelweiss Financial Group in India, originally supporting areas like education, health, and children's issues. In more recent years, EdelGive has begun to work more collaboratively, engaging multi-stakeholder partnerships with state and corporate partners on scalable projects that have an impact on India's massive population. Such projects include the ongoing Collaborators for Transforming Education (CTE), the Migrants Resilience Collaborative (MRC), and the Coalition for Women Empowerment (CWE).

What was the challenge?

In their earlier years, EdelGive offered more traditional, project-based forms of grant-making in areas like education, health, and children's issues. Over time, their outlook grew to also include more niche subject areas like women's rights, climate, and agriculture.

Despite their progress, EdelGive recognised a fundamental gap in their early approach. Grants were addressing projects, but not the organisations themselves. In the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, EdelGive's CEO, Naghma Mulla, realised that while the grants the foundation was providing were helping organisations meet immediate needs and execute specific functions, they were not offering funding that helped NGOs reach a point of financial and operational resilience, where they could sustainably deliver on their promises. For instance, hunger was a big problem in India, and NGOs trying to tackle this issue were struggling against forms of funding that only covered project costs but neglected to account for the human and labour resources required to meet urgent needs. NGOs started wearing thin, having to use reserves to pay staff because funders were not paying these costs. As well as the severe institutional impact of this underfunding, organisations were less able to grow their programmes and reach communities in need.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, these already existing issues deepened significantly: a 2021 Bridgespan [study](#) surveying 388 Indian NGOs in September of 2020 shows that organisations were chronically underfunded in their operations and support functions. Organisations had low financial resilience, often with less than a few months of reserve money, and the vast majority reported gaps in indirect cost allocation.

Although in 2020 the [Indian private sector giving rose by 23%](#) from the previous year to try to meet the emergency of COVID-19, resources were mainly allocated to direct relief efforts, funding urgent needs like food. However, the operational costs of service-providing organisations – such as the labour of farm workers and delivery drivers, as well as transportation, administration, and other human resources costs – were neglected. Regardless of this, many organisations continued to provide essential services throughout the crisis, experiencing severe salary cuts, the draining of reserves, and shortfalls in covering indirect costs. Through their active communication networks via programme officers and partners, EdelGive was receiving feedback from the field on how difficult it was becoming to save their staff and support the staff's mental well-being during this time. Alongside other philanthropic actors, EdelGive was concerned that without intervention, the pandemic would negatively impact grassroots organisations so deeply that they would be unable to recover.

What was the response?

EdelGive's [GROW Fund](#) (piloted from 2022–2024) was an urgent response to this issue, created to support organisations that were effecting change for disadvantaged communities at the grassroots level by providing financial and organisational development resources. Progressing philanthropy towards more trust-based approaches, core grant-making, and practices of transparency, the GROW Fund was the first of its kind in India.

Anchored by EdelGive, and created with donations from 37 funding [partners](#), blending types of funds from diverse sources including well-established Indian and international foundations, as well as several Indian Corporate Social Responsibility institutions and individuals, the fund was designed to support 100 small and mid-sized organisations through the pandemic aftershocks with non-programmatic grants, with the aim that they would emerge from the crisis stronger. GROW supported these organisations with grants of INR 40 lakh (about USD 46,000) per organisation per year, which were to be spent as needed on core costs. Simultaneously, to provide this support, the Fund facilitated a 24-month capacity-building programme that emphasised three areas: sustainability, organisational development, and future readiness.

The preparation, fundraising, reporting, and management of the GROW Fund has been a transformative process for EdelGive, who have shifted their internal approaches in numerous ways, including increased collaboration with many funders, as well as many partners in the case of GROW. They have also learned more contextualised ways of understanding data and impact, for instance, by measuring metrics of organisational health, rather than more concrete project outputs. These shifts are part of a broader investment in building a more resilient NGO sector, including through EdelGive's involvement in the [Pay-What-It-Takes India Initiative](#).

EdelGive's CEO, Naghma Mulla, was the one to introduce the idea of a pooled fund in order to help support and strengthen the internal capacity of grassroots organisations doing crucial work for Indian society. Establishing such a massive project was a major risk to EdelGive, a relatively small organisation, and thus Mulla gathered research and feedback to convince the board of the idea. She spoke with over twenty experts from India and elsewhere, receiving advice on the feasibility and possible implementation approaches for the GROW Fund, as well as gauging possible areas for caution.

EdelGive also harnessed their learnings from their [Sandbox Grants](#) long-term grant-making programme, which supported organisations making change in particularly marginalised regions of India. The work of Sandbox has been key in helping EdelGive refine their approach to grant-making generally, and was useful in the planning of the GROW Fund. Sandbox has shown EdelGive that crucial infrastructure has been missing within NGOs, and that they needed to fund people, systems, and processes, ultimately supporting organisational resilience in order to ensure long-term implementation of community-based programmes. This learning was central to GROW's creation.

Following these consultations and research processes, plans for the GROW programme began to take shape, and the board was convinced of the programme's importance. As a result of both key [research](#) emerging in the sector and Mulla's own consultation processes, the board recognised the urgency of supporting NGOs that were suffering through the pandemic. The proposition was accepted, with some board members even putting their personal funds behind it.

Buy-in from funders was of crucial importance. EdelGive leveraged their grant-making track record and reputation, leaning into their credibility to build funders' confidence in their capabilities. They were the first funder of GROW, and assured potential funders of complete transparency, and that they would take full ownership of all risk and accountability for the project. A small group of reputable funders – the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and MacArthur Foundation, followed by Indian funders Rohini Nilekani and Amit Chandra – were the first on board. This increased credibility and set the tone for more funders to join the first cycle.

Partnering with what turned out to be 37 funders was no easy task. Robust, transparent, and accountable processes for managing money were as essential as skilled communication. In managing the NGO partnerships, EdelGive decided to keep their GROW Fund team small at 7–8 members, with competencies ranging from data to programme management. They partnered with [Social Lens](#), with whom they have been working for over a decade, for organisational development, and together created the GROW Hub to support the 100 organisations. This hub made resources available for the NGOs' self-development in the areas of time management, coaching, finance, and risk management. Social Lens also assisted the GROW Fund in developing tools to assess organisational health in the partners throughout the programme, looking at key capacity areas like human resources, financial management, technology, measurement systems, and creating tailor-made resources helping them to address their challenge areas.

Through GROW, EdelGive has been challenged to look differently at information, to reconsider what data they are trying to measure, and how to use and process it to assess whether they are making a difference. Key to this is the deepened recognition that data must be read in context. Internally, this has changed the way they hire, to ensure that they have a team that understands this: finding individuals who are able to harness the skills and characteristics of both the sharp, data-driven, and disciplined nature of the corporate sector, and the empathy-driven, contextually-invested demeanour of the social sector, has been crucial in adding to a team suited to EdelGive's increased involvement in multi-sector collaborations. Furthermore, working with expert partners like Social Lens has taught EdelGive that true capacity building should not push NGOs for KPIs, but instead should focus on strengthening organisational health in areas that allow organisations to do their work as effectively as possible.

Innovative funding strategies require innovative management systems that are in alignment with core organisational goals. Because EdelGive had learned time and again that every NGO caters to specific conditions within its own context, they knew that burdening the 100 organisations with a plethora of reporting processes would likely fail to measure impact according to metrics that made sense for each partner, and would take time from their important work. Thus, with the GROW Fund, EdelGive launched a streamlined reporting process in which a single report was produced for all funders, rather than following every organisation's singular requirements. In philanthropy, this approach was rather unique, with funders sometimes being stringent about fulfilling their own requirements. The GROW report prioritised metrics developed with Social Lens, which were based on organisational health rather than outputs or projects. To convince funders of the viability of this strategy, EdelGive promised that the programme would be well-executed, well-monitored, and transparent. They actioned this through holding quarterly and annual meetings in which all stakeholders were present and could ask questions openly. These assurances and practices of transparency helped to establish trust in GROW's unique reporting process and offered the philanthropy sector at large an example of an equitable approach to reporting on pooled funds.

The first cycle of the GROW Fund supported 100 grassroots organisations across India, working in areas such as conservation, LGBTQIA+ rights, legal aid, women's empowerment, rural development, health, education, and more. With 25 organisations selected from each region – Northern, Southern, Eastern, and Western – the scale demanded a faster, more efficient vetting process. Traditionally, EdelGive's due diligence took 6–18 months. For GROW, they condensed it into six months by reassessing priorities (compliance was non-negotiable, while they remained flexible in areas like NGOs' articulation of their visions) and creating systems to manage parts of the process in bulk, thus saving time while not sacrificing rigour. To manage these processes at scale, EdelGive partnered with [Grant Thornton](#), with whom they had also created a digital application portal and a helpdesk for applicant support. After rounds of compliance checks, external reviews, and expert evaluations, 241 organisations were assessed. Of these, 157 advanced, and the final 100 grantees were announced in January 2022.

Despite all the preparations, unexpected challenges arose with the provision of unrestricted grants. While having convinced funders of the merits of core funding for NGOs, EdelGive had not anticipated that the organisations they hoped to support would be suspicious of unrestricted grants. Perhaps rooted in difficult historical relationships between funders and NGOs, organisations wondered why the funding came with no strings attached, and what the true intentions of the GROW Fund were. It was crucial for the GROW Fund to establish the fact that their work depended fully on the organisations' buy-in, and that its longevity was contingent on their investment and participation. Once onboarded, it was explained to partners that EdelGive was depending on them, as much as they may have been depending on the fund's support, establishing from the outset that this was not a power dynamic relationship, but a partnership of shared responsibility. This open communication from EdelGive went a long way in assuring partners, who then felt more able to trust in the unrestricted grants.

EdelGive has recently announced a new iteration of GROW, the 'GROW+ Fund', whose focus is on support for NGOs doing people-centric climate work in India. In their call for collaboration from both funders and NGOs in the realisation of grassroots resilience and capacity building, the Fund's many innovations, challenges, and learnings offer a crucial case study for like-minded organisations across the sector, and have offered a myriad of lessons to EdelGive, who are forever changed by this way of working. The GROW Fund has changed the fabric of EdelGive, who are deeply interested both in continuing to work with pooled funds and in making the tools and skills needed for this work accessible to the public.

What have they learned?

- ✓ **Invest in the long-term sustainability of organisations you believe in with unrestricted funding.** For the GROW Fund, EdelGive wanted to support small and mid-sized NGOs across sectors and geographies in India who had been dedicated to serving the needs of their community, and who were fully compliant. Expecting lasting impact while offering only short-term, project-based support often leads to instability and burnout. The GROW Fund offers a powerful example of what's possible when NGOs are trusted with flexible support mechanisms that help them build resilience, strengthen their capabilities, and emerge stronger from crises.

- ✓ **Build trust with funders and NGO partners.** GROW Fund marked a bold shift towards core funding and collective giving, bringing together 37 donors in a pooled fund. Building trust was key to the success of the fund. By treating NGOs as true partners and recognising their role in sustaining the work, EdelGive fostered deep mutual buy-in. For funders, maintaining transparency at every step was key: regular check-ins, open communication, and taking on project risk helped ease concerns and build lasting confidence.
- ✓ **Leverage your reputation and show confidence through buy-in and the willingness to take on risk.** EdelGive's reputation and experience – particularly their learnings from the long-term SandBox Program – opened doors, but this was not enough on its own to build funder confidence. They were the first funders of the GROW Fund, taking the lead and encouraging others to give. Additionally, EdelGive took on accountability for reporting on the project's progress, easing the burden on the partner NGOs. EdelGive also took full ownership of the NGOs' compliance and took responsibility for honouring the Key Performance Indicators of the GROW Fund. Showing their absolute faith in the fund demonstrated enough confidence for funders to buy into this bold idea at scale.
- ✓ **Unlock your team's potential through collaborations with expert organisations.** GROW Fund keeps its core team small and taps into expert partners for specialised roles like capacity building and grant management. This approach ensures strategic oversight while maximising efficiency and leveraging external expertise.
- ✓ **Rethink success, measure what matters, and ease reporting processes for grantee partners.** EdelGive's shift to core funding and organisational development meant redefining success not by short-term project outputs, but by long-term resilience and health of partner organisations. This pivot required reimagining data collection, making it less about ticking boxes and more about tracking sustainability. Core funding is patient, long-term work, and it demands evaluation approaches that reflect that. Crucially, EdelGive also took on the risk and shared ownership of performance, compliance, and outcomes, easing the burden on grantee partners and enabling them to focus on impact.
- ✓ **Transform your practices and strengthen philanthropy ecosystems.** Pooled funds, standardised reporting, and unrestricted funding are all transformative and possible. But changing mindsets and getting the buy-in of stakeholders requires convincing. EdelGive harnessed their solid track record, their knowledge yielded from long-term grant-making, and the expertise of numerous consultants in designing the GROW Fund. Pooled funds like the GROW Fund not only channel more resources into the sector, they help shift norms, spark systemic change, and build a more connected and resilient philanthropy support ecosystem.

Key outcomes and impact indicators

100 NGOs supported across four regions

The Grow Fund's first cycle supported 100 NGOs across India, including 25 each from the Northern, Eastern, Southern, and Western regions.

INR 100 crore fund backed by 37 donors

The fund, formed in compliance with the CSR law, was valued at INR 100 crore (about USD 11.5 million) and was established with funds from 37 funders.

NGOs mobilised INR 147.9 crore in two years

The GROW Fund enabled 53 NGOs to raise INR 147.9 crore (just over USD 17 million) by the end of the two-year grant.

Strong organisational growth across the cohort

The Fund saw:

- 86% of organisations demonstrated overall growth.
- 50% increase in operational efficiency for 26% of organisations.
- 81% of the cohort reported diversified funding sources, improved donor relations, and effective storytelling.
- Improved donor engagement and retention were seen in 94% of organisations.
- Long-term organisational development plans were developed by 76% of the cohort, with capacity building needs identified by 60%.
- Increased technical know-how of communication strategies and periodic active engagement were observed with 65% of NGOs.
- About 18% of organisations connected with at least a few NGO partners in the GROW cohort.

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