The True Pace of Rural Development: Beyond Funding Cycles

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What if the biggest obstacle to lasting rural development isn't a lack of solutions but a lack of time? Too often, funding cycles dictate the timeline for change rather than the realities of community growth. Rural development does not unfold according to neatly structured grant periods. It moves at the pace of the community, shaped by deep-rooted traditions, lived experiences, and the gradual process of trust-building and learning. Yet, much of the funding available for rural development follows rigid three-to-five-year cycles, which rarely align with the long-term nature of real transformation.

One of the most significant challenges in community development is fostering behavioural change. Whether it is adopting climate-resilient farming methods, improving financial literacy, or strengthening local governance, lasting change requires more than a single intervention. Behavioural shifts take time, often spanning years, and require multiple touchpoints, ongoing support, and reinforcement through practice. A one-time training or a single investment rarely results in meaningful transformation.

Take, for example, sustainable agriculture initiatives. Encouraging farmers to shift from conventional farming to agroecological practices requires more than an initial workshop. It demands continuous learning, mentorship, and real-time problem-solving. We have seen this first-hand in the Rural Action for Climate Resilience Project (RACR), where consistent mentorship has been the key driver of lasting change. One community gardening initiative in Port St Johns, Eastern Cape, struggled initially with new agroecology farming techniques, but with ongoing technical support, they gradually adapted. Today, they have successfully established a thriving community garden that not only feeds

local families but has also inspired neighbouring communities to adopt similar practices. Additionally, it has fostered community cohesion and confidence.

When funding is tied to rigid cycles, communities are often left stranded when a project ends, forced to pause or even abandon progress due to a lack of continued support. This disrupts momentum and undermines confidence in external interventions. Conversely, continuous, flexible funding allows for iterative learning, adaptation, and long-term resilience-building. It enables community members to integrate new practices into their daily lives, develop local leadership, and eventually sustain initiatives independently.

The approach of the Social Change Assistance Trust (SCAT) is an example of how consistent funding enables long-term community development. Through its core grants, fundraising incentives, development training funds, and special project funds, SCAT provides rural community-based organisations (CBOs) with both the opportunity to participate in projects and the ability to sustain their work beyond project-specific funding cycles.

SCAT provides the following financial support:

- Core Grants – Small grants that contribute to the running costs of CBOs, ensuring they can maintain basic operational functions. These grants are paid monthly or quarterly, depending on the organisation's development phase.
- Fundraising Incentive Scheme (FRIS) – Encourages community-driven philanthropy by rewarding local fundraising efforts.
- Development Fund for Training (DFT) – Supports capacity-building initiatives for CBOs.
- Special Project Funds – Allocated for specific initiatives such as food security, local economic development, youth initiatives, and climate adaptation.

SCAT's belief in developmental grant-making means that CBOs have the autonomy to allocate resources based on their needs while leveraging additional support. This approach respects the organic nature of community development, reinforcing the idea that transformation takes time and cannot be dictated by external timelines.

To foster meaningful rural development, we must move beyond short-term, transactional funding models and embrace approaches that respect the natural pace of community-driven change. Investments should be long-term, responsive, and embedded in the reality that development is not a project; it is a process. Only by shifting the way we fund and support rural communities can we create lasting impact and genuine transformation.