

North American Partnership for Environmental Community Action (NAPECA) Grant Program



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Long-term Impact Assessment



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In 1995, the Council of the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) created its first-ever grant program, the North American Fund for Environmental Cooperation (NAFEC), with the purpose of directly engaging the energy and imagination of North Americans in conserving, protecting and enhancing the environment and ensuring the sustainable use of natural resources and ecosystems in support of sustainable development. NAFEC recognized the unique and essential role played by local communities, local governments and nongovernmental organizations in achieving this objective (CEC Council 1995). NAFEC operated from 1996 to 2004, supporting the implementation of 196 projects. However, it was closed in 2005 due to budget limitations.

In 2010, the CEC Council decided to establish a new grant program, the North American Partnership for Environmental Community Action (NAPECA), to promote model environmental initiatives that use innovation and flexibility to help build long-term partnerships that would improve environmental conditions at the community, Indigenous, local, and regional levels. This grant program also had the goal of supporting the priorities of the CEC's five-year Strategic Plan.

Considering the intended objective of NAPECA to improve environmental conditions, the CEC commissioned a long-term impact assessment (LTIA) in 2023 to report on the process, results and long-term impacts of the grants in order to inform decisions affecting future implementation of the program. This report presents the main results of the second assessment of NAPECA,¹ covering the cycles 2017–2018 and 2019–2020 and the selection process for the cycle 2022–2024.

1. A previous assessment of the first six years of the program's implementation (2011–2017) was carried out in 2017.

ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

The assessment had three goals. First, to evaluate how the objective of NAPECA has been achieved through the implementation of the community projects. Second, to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the processes associated with the delivery of the grant program. Finally, to provide recommendations on areas of improvement for future NAPECA cycles, particularly through an analysis of the application stage and selection process of the 2022–2024 grant cycle.

This LTIA involved gathering data from documents developed by the CEC and by project proponents and grantees. It also used information obtained through 49 surveys and 13 interviews with relevant actors. The analysis also assessed the origin of NAPECA, to determine how it aligned with the CEC's mission and mandate. Then it evaluated the grant program's management process. Finally, it assessed the results and impacts obtained through the 20 projects carried out during cycles 2017–2018 and 2019–2020.

Perception of NAPECA as reported by applicants and grantees

- It provides resources to organizations with limited or no experience in project implementation.
- It provides resources to new organizations.
- Organizations may still receive a CEC grant even in the absence of additional funding.



MAIN FINDINGS

Has NAPECA achieved its objective?

As noted, the NAPECA program is intended to support a bottom-up approach and build partnerships to improve environmental conditions at the community, local and regional levels, in alignment with the objectives of the Agreement on Environmental Cooperation (available at <http://www.cec.org/about/agreement-on-environmental-cooperation/>). More specifically, NAPECA supports the Agreement's mandate stated in Article 1, *to strengthen cooperation between the Parties to conserve, protect, and enhance the environment and address environmental challenges and priorities; and promote cooperation on and public participation in the development of environmental laws, regulations, procedures, policies, and practices*. NAPECA provides a mechanism for the three countries to select and define topics and criteria to be associated with each NAPECA cycle. It allows the countries to tackle shared environmental challenges through bottom-up projects that generate positive impacts at the community level.

Assessing the applicants' and grantees' perceptions of the grant program allows the conclusion that: 1) NAPECA has been successful in steadily attracting a high number of applications throughout the cycles; and 2) applicants and grantees have a very positive impression of NAPECA.

However, the number of proposals received has slightly declined over the cycles. For the cycle 2017–2018 the number of proposals received was 294, for the cycle 2018–2020 it was 231 and for the cycle 2022–2024 it was 203. The reason for the decrease in the numbers of applications is unclear, but it seems possible that for the 2022–2024 cycle, the COVID pandemic may have had some impact in reducing individual and institutional capacity for applicants to prepare proposals.

Overall, it is possible to state that, through the different projects' outcomes and impact, NAPECA has been successful in achieving its objective of building long-term partnerships to *improve environmental conditions at the community level*.

Outcomes and Impact

NAPECA projects have achieved a wide range of results, including the development of apps, providing specific training for key actors, capacity-building for several communities, land-use planning for thousands of square kilometers, and restoration of tens of hectares. The variety in accomplishment has its origin in the calls for proposals, which offered a wide spectrum of alternatives for the types of projects NAPECA could support. To understand the impact of NAPECA, the assessment aggregated the different projects into four discrete categories: capacity building, sustainable management, restoration, and research and development.

NAPECA has been successful in achieving its objective of building long-term partnerships to improve environmental conditions at the community level. All actors who participated in this assessment stated that their organizations² developed alliances with different stakeholders to support the various stages of project implementation. The most common partnership created among grantees is between the implementing organization (either a university or civil society organization) and the community or communities where the project was implemented.

2. Applicant organizations could be the same communities where the projects are implemented (project communities) or external organizations willing to collaborate with communities (implementing organization).



Another important outcome of NAPECA has to do with capacity building. The assessment showed that 19 out of the 20 projects have achieved important results related to strengthening communities' capacities in different areas, such as:

- improving ecosystem management through direct stewardship, restoration activities or economic activities based on ecosystem services;
- creating or strengthening internal governance to develop collective planning or other decision-making processes;
- improving risk management and resilience through situational analysis and development of management or risk plans; and
- improving individual and collective awareness of the importance of their cultural practices, especially those that support sound environmental management.

The improved capacities observed could be further classified in subcategories, with most of the projects presenting more than one:

Individual awareness. In these projects, individuals received information about a specific situation through different channels:

- Preserving the Traditional Ecological Knowledge of First Foods and Medicines (Pierce County, Washington State, United States, 2017–2018).
- Generation of a local strategy for adaptation and management of risk and vulnerability to disasters at the school and community level (Sierra sur de Oaxaca, Oaxaca, Mexico, 2019–2020).
- Mobile unit for post-harvest handling of surplus native and criollo maize for its sale as a specialty product (San Antonio Cuixtla, San Pedro Ozumacín, San Pedro Yólox, San Mateo Yetla, Cerro Armadillo Grande, San Rafael Agua de Pescadito, Santa Fe y la Mar, San Lucas Arroyo Palomo, Montenegro, Santa Lucía Mecaltepec, Río de Chicle, Tooxi, Santiago Asunción, Nuevo Progreso, San Juan Colorado, San Juan Yagila, San Miguel Tiltepec, Santa María Zoogochi, Santa Ana Zegache, Candelaria Loxicha, Zapotal, Palma Larga Cozoaltepec, Cofradía, Guzmán, Zapotengo, San Pedro Pochutla, Cerro Chino, San Felipe Tejalápam, and Santiago Tlazoyaltepec, all in the State of Oaxaca, Mexico, 2017–2018).

Individual skills. These projects received specific training for key actors:

- Building Production Capacities in Mayan Forest Communities (Juan Sarabia, Municipality Othon P. Blanco, where the Technological Institute of the Mayan Zone [ITZM] is located, and the town of Nohbec, Municipality of Felipe Carrillo Puerto. Both are in the State of Quintana Roo, Mexico. Benefits from the project will extend to the communities of Petcacab y Polinkin, Caobas, Xhazil, Bacalar, and Alianza Selva Maya, Mexico, 2017–2018).
- Lake Winnipeg Waterways, Waste to Wonder (Three Conservation Districts in Manitoba; Seine-Rat River Conservation District [Steinbach and area R5G 0T5], Whitemud Conservation District [Neepawa and area R0J 1H0], and East Interlake Conservation District [Gimli and area R0C 1B0], Canada, 2017–2018).
- Community Solar Hub Drive (Utuado, Jayuya, Aibonito, Caguas and San Juan, Puerto Rico, United States, 2019–2020).

Collective awareness. Members of a group received information, through different channels, about the potential of collective action to address specific issues, such as in the following project:

- Maricopa Coalition on Climate Change and Public Health: Extreme Heat (Maricopa & Pinal Counties, Arizona, United States, 2019–2020).

Collective skills. A group developed specific skills for collective decision-making and collective action, such as developing community risk assessments and management plans, such as in the following projects:

- Planning for Resilient Smart Energy Communities in Alberta (Five communities in Alberta, Canada, 2019–2020).
- Workshops for community involvement in the use of Nunaliit for environmental applied research in Mexico (Pa Ipai and Koal families and Kiliwa and Cucupa [Yuman people]. The study areas are Ensenada and Alto Golfo of Baja California, Mexico, 2017–2018).
- Strengthening of capacities for the reduction of vulnerability to Climate Change in the Usumacinta River basin, Tabasco (Centla, Jonuta, Macuspana and Tenosique, Tabasco, Mexico, 2019–2020).

Institutional capacities. Organizations became better equipped to perform their activities, through individual capacity building or through establishing working processes, acquiring materials or infrastructure, among other measures, such as in these projects:

- Building Production Capacities in Mayan Forest Communities (Juan Sarabia, Municipality Othon P. Blanco, where the Technological Institute of the Mayan Zone [ITZM] is located, and the town of Nohbec, Municipality of Felipe Carrillo Puerto. Both are in the State of Quintana Roo, Mexico. Benefits from the project will extend to the communities of Petcacab y Polinkin, Caobas, Xhazil, Bacalar, and Alianza Selva Maya, Mexico, 2017–2018).
- Mi'kmaw Wildfire Resilience Initiative (Eight Mi'kmaw communities in Nova Scotia, Canada, 2019–2020).

The development of partnerships and capacity building in communities provides evidence that NAPECA is achieving its objective. Furthermore, this advancement shows the positive impacts that the grants are having in different communities in North America.





Effectiveness and efficiency of the process

The overall NAPECA process has evolved over the last three grant cycles. An important change was the inclusion of an external consultant to review the proposals. This represents a considerable reduction in the time invested by the Secretariat in the review of proposals and provides additional transparency, traceability and credibility to the selection process by incorporating a broader range of expertise and perspectives.

Participants in this NAPECA assessment suggested potential changes to improve the application process. These include the creation of supporting materials such as written instructions, explanatory videos, examples of successful proposals or interaction opportunities with the CEC Secretariat, through webinars or live chats. Grantees also expressed their desire for more ongoing communication during project implementation, in the form of additional follow-up calls or emails.

Even while cognizant of the high number of proposals received, some participants noted they would like to see the Call for Proposals advertised on grant platforms or other communication channels. Finally, participants expressed their interest in receiving CEC Secretariat visits to their projects in order to showcase results and especially to demonstrate firsthand the community's participation in and satisfaction with NAPECA.



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RECOMMENDATIONS

The final recommendations in the assessment aim to strengthen both NAPECA's design and "internal processes and enhance the strength of the projects' impact through incorporating criteria to support partnerships and communication. The assessment recommends the following:

- Developing a detailed theory of change³ for the grant program, to guide its implementation process, including for the development of calls for proposals, the execution of projects, as well as their monitoring and evaluation.
- Incorporating activities to strengthen cooperation and the creation of partnerships, as mandated by Article 1 of the Agreement on Environmental Cooperation, including knowledge exchange and the organization of different events among past and current grantees.
- Developing mechanisms to ensure and promote, when possible, the creation of partnerships between the CEC (or the CEC Parties) and grantees.
- Creating partnerships among CEC Secretariat and other stakeholders in the three countries to enhance NAPECA's impact; for example, supporting the grant program's implementation with additional funding, offering capacity building to project developers, and exchanging best practices.
- Grouping projects by categories (e.g., restoration, sustainable management, capacity building, research and development) and identifying specific and consistent metrics that correspond to these categories and also align with NAPECA's objective. Mandatory reporting should be requested from grantees on these metrics.

REFERENCES

- CEC Council. 1995. *Council resolution 95-09: Creation of the North American Environment Fund*. Oaxaca, Mexico, 1995.
- Rogers, P. 2014. *Theory of Change, Methodological Briefs: Impact Evaluation 2*, UNICEF Office of Research, Florence.
- Stafford Smith, M. 2020. *Theory of Change Primer, A STAP Advisory Document*. Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel to the Global Environment Facility. Washington, D.C.

3. A theory of change is a mechanism "to identify the current situation (in terms of needs and opportunities), the intended situation and what needs to be done to move from one to the other" (Rodgers 2014). In more detail, "it creates an explicit account of how and why an intervention is expected to achieve its intended outcomes and impact goal, based on outlining a set of key causal pathways arising from the activities and outputs of the intervention (whether at program or project level) and the assumptions underlying these causal connections" (Stafford Smith 2020).

