

Southeast Asia Spark Fund: Shaping the Future for Youth by Youth

My name is Dang Thanh Huong, a Southeast Asia Spark Fund Panelist from Vietnam.

This is the first time I joined the grant-making and decision-making process, and here is what I learned from the Thailand Spark Fund Grant decision-making programs in Songkhla, Thailand - January 2024, and Vietnam - March 2024.



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The journey as a SEA Spark Fund Youth Panelist has been a memorable and transformative experience. Over 10 months, I thoroughly explored the complexities of fund design and decision-making processes. More importantly, I've gained an in-depth understanding of the significant role of the Youth in shaping the future of their communities.

Here are some key takeaways I'd like to share:

1. Youth Voices Matter:

Empowering youth and entrusting them with decision-making responsibilities is invaluable. The insights shared by Youth Panelists from Vietnam and Thailand have been instrumental in shaping our understanding of our countries' unique challenges and opportunities. A prominent example was the Thailand Panelists, who were able to point out some projects that focused on the area that suffered major environmental issues in Thailand, and the Vietnam Panelists were able to provide insights into Vietnam's situation being different from other countries. By prioritizing projects based on their impact and alignment with community needs, we ensure that our support reaches those who need it most and thus help create a more valuable impact on the environment in our community.



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2. Language Inclusivity - Language Justice:

Language inclusivity is of utmost importance in ensuring that all voices are heard. Spark Fund's commitment to bridging the language gap by having Thai and Vietnamese interpreters in all of its meetings shows its effort to foster a truly inclusive environment.

Because language is no longer a barrier, there were a surmountable amount of discussions being held between all panelists. By allowing panelists to express themselves in their preferred language, Spark Fund accelerates the efficiency of our discussions and enriches the decision-making process with diverse perspectives.

In our Spark Fund team meetings, I can easily see Panelists who did not speak a common language interacting with each other effectively in their own languages. When a Panelist speaks, other Panelists will simultaneously hear the interpretation in their earpieces, and then be able to give a timely response. But even in small group discussions and casual conversations without an interpreter, the panelists were still able to communicate using technology. Even for me as an English speaker, there were times I wanted to explain a sensitive topic and I did not know how to deliver that properly in English, I still confidently expressed my thoughts by changing to my mother tongue and waiting for the interpreter to help me deliver the message to the team. All of this was made possible only by the effort of Spark Fund in fostering language justice. Seeing that English, Thai, and Vietnamese were being used effortlessly throughout the program was truly amazing and mind-opening.

Video from Tuktik:

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3. Learn to Unlearn:

Throughout this journey, I've come to realize the importance of challenging our preconceptions and being open to new ideas. The Singapore Panelists brought innovative perspectives on environmental initiatives and sustainability development by sharing successful models and stories in their country - one of the leading superpowers in building a sustainable community. What we think we know may not always be the truth, and one thing I have learned while working with a diverse group of people is that it's essential to approach our work with humility and a willingness to unlearn and relearn.



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4. Do not be afraid to speak out:

As panelists, it's our responsibility to advocate for change whenever we identify shortcomings in our processes. We put effort into ensuring that our decisions are fair and equitable by identifying potential issues and finding an agreed solution. For me, this also includes not being afraid to inform the team about the aspects that I was not familiar with and willing to learn more from others. It is also important for panelists to learn how to actively listen to others' opinions and respond to them in a constructive approach.



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5. With great power, comes great responsibility:

The power to allocate funding carries a weighty responsibility. One guiding principle I always bear in mind is ensuring that funding reaches the correct organization and individual, enabling it to genuinely address urgent environmental issues and make a significant impact. To make that happen, we were careful and detailed with the “Portrait of the Successful Applicant” - the criteria that shaped the idea of the applicant we were looking for. After creating a detailed criteria setting, we designed and decided on an applicant voting process that is accessible, feasible, and most effective for everyone. Finally, as panelists, we must uphold the values of integrity and accountability to ensure the quality of the process. This is how we make sure we fulfill our responsibility.



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6. There is so much to learn:

The depth of innovative ideas presented through project proposals in the Thailand Spark Fund, and the individual application in the Vietnam Spark Fund, have been truly inspiring. Each proposal and application offers a glimpse into the diverse landscape of environmental activism and innovation in Thailand and Vietnam, therefore across Southeast Asia, which sparks my curiosity and ignites my feeling of pride to be a South East Asian citizen and my belief in the future of the region in addressing and mitigating environmental issues.



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I am thankful for having this opportunity to serve as a SEA Spark Fund Youth Panelist 2023 - 2024. Through this experience, I've gained a deeper appreciation for the mission and vision of the Global Fund for Children in empowering youth to shape their futures and communities. SEA Spark Fund sparks ideas, friendships, and relationships between their panelists, organizations, and fellows. I cannot wait to see the impact of the selected projects and fellows as they work to create positive change in the world.