

Working Together for a Fairer, Cooler World

Insights on co-developing
cooling solutions, from
Ashden's Fair Cooling Fund



Expensive ice blocks are one of the few options for fish traders in rural Ghana seeking to preserve their catch. Thanks to a Fair Cooling Fund grant, PEG Africa is piloting the sale of fridges and freezers to lakeside communities. Credit: Nana Kofi Acquah/Ashden.

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Project overview

As global temperatures climb, 2.2 billion people go without clean and efficient cooling – threatening their health and their ability to earn a living. The dangers of extreme heat are amplified by poverty and social challenges such as gender inequality and political marginalisation. What's more, rising heat further widens the gap between the wealthy and the rest – reducing living standards, incomes and resilience in many of the world's worst-off countries.

Soaring temperatures trap many millions of people in a vicious cycle. For them, mechanised air conditioning is often unaffordable – and in any case, its use generates emissions that drive temperatures even higher. There is an urgent need to widen access to 'fair cooling' – solutions that are sustainable, affordable, and designed to meet the needs of those most at risk.

This report examines the co-development approach at the heart of Ashden's Fair Cooling Fund. The fund is supported by the Kigali Cooling Efficiency Program (K-CEP), which helps developing countries transition to energy-efficient, climate-friendly, and affordable cooling solutions. The Fair Cooling Fund has given grants of up to \$100,000 to seven organisations, referred to here as the fund 'cohort', widening access to sustainable cooling. Ashden is immensely grateful to K-CEP for making this work possible.

Grant recipients were drawn from the business, academia and non-profit sectors. Each submitted a proposal for work to be carried out, but their final initiatives were designed in collaboration with Ashden and other cohort members. These final initiatives focus on two key areas – raising incomes through sustainable cold chain, and creating cooler homes and streets. The fund has also financed communications by Ashden highlighting the need for fair cooling.

The report explains the design choices behind the Fair Cooling Fund and gathers feedback from grantees and Ashden staff on the effectiveness of its co-development approach. Why have we chosen to examine this process in detail? Because radical approaches, new partnerships and greater involvement from every section of society will be essential in order to achieve sustainable cooling for all. So a greater understanding of the mechanisms that could stimulate this shift is vital.

The Fair Cooling Fund was designed to draw on Ashden's strengths. These include our well-established network of frontline organisations, built through the Ashden discovery process – a global search for pioneering climate organisations. The fund also aligns with our commitment to climate action that simultaneously delivers social justice, as well as our focus on marginalised communities and our experience as a convener of organisations. It builds on our strong record of helping commercial organisations scale-up and achieve social goals – as well as our expertise in impactful communications.

The fund (which is a grant-making exercise, not an investment vehicle) was launched in spring 2020, when Ashden recruited a diverse group of eight organisations to take part in a six-month co-development process. This process included workshops, surveys, written exercises, and one-to-one meetings. It brought together Ashden staff and key contacts from each participating organisation. Experts in sustainable cooling from the K-CEP network also joined certain meetings and shared feedback on draft plans. Plans were signed off and grants awarded to seven of the eight organisations at the end of the year. These grants will support activity taking place through 2021 and 2022.

What did we learn?

The full impact of the co-development process will be clearer in early 2022, when the funded activity it developed has taken place. But we consider the co-development process to have been a broadly successful one, that has brought a greater focus on social impact to the funded work and laid the foundations for continuing success and collaboration in the years ahead. Our key lessons are as follows:

- A co-development process can give organisations – particularly businesses – a rare opportunity to deeply consider their purpose, the full lives of the people they work with, and the social consequences of their work. Our cohort were excited about exploring the lives of their customers and beneficiaries from a more holistic perspective, something they had rarely been able to do before.
- The collaborative aspects of the co-development process are outside the experience of many frontline organisations, particularly private enterprises. Adapting to this new way of working is a significant challenge – but one that brought many in the group significant benefits.
- With the potential prize of relatively unrestricted grant funding, organisations will propose bold plans and ideas well outside of their experience. This is a pathway to innovation, but brings challenges that need to be carefully handled.
- A co-development process inherently builds grant recipients' storytelling skills and understanding, as they are compelled to explain their work and its context to their co-development partners. The process also fuels more informed and targeted communications by the grant-giver.

Recommendations for grant-giving organisations undertaking a co-development process

- Secure early clarity around applicant's context and proposed theory of change – but be aware that many organisations, particularly those less familiar with grant funding processes, will need support to articulate this.
- As early as possible, make a realistic assessment of the capacity of potential grantees to deliver their plans (not just the potential of the plans themselves).
- Use a clear and direct style to communicate across cultural barriers, mindful that ambiguity can increase pressure on all parties.
- Create an explicit plan for achieving internal stakeholder buy-in at the grant-giving organisation. If the project represents a move into mutual (rather than transactional) interactions, support this cultural shift by making space for learning, reflection and the trial-and-error approaches fundamental to innovation.
- Carefully consider the role of external experts – a position of assessment partner, if done effectively, will make considerable demands on their time. Recruiting them as learning partners, able to reflect on themes and ideas thrown up by the process, may be more practical and beneficial.
- The necessary depth of a co-development process makes it an excellent opportunity to upskill communications staff in key issues, and to forge useful bonds between them and grant recipients. However, it may not immediately generate publishable content. This should be factored into communications planning.



30 year old Sangeeta Katveer is dairy farmer from Maharashtra, India. Cohort member Promethean Power Systems is helping her community chill the milk they produce, so it reaches more consumers and attracts a higher price. Credit: Prashanth Vishwanathan/Ashden.

Our co-development process explained

The guiding principle for the design of the Fair Cooling Fund was ‘collaborative learning and development’. We aimed to widen the scope of possibility for action by organisations, individually and collectively, through facilitating useful exchanges and building supportive relationships that could strengthen delivery. As a result, we viewed the diversity of our selected cohort as an asset that could unlock or accelerate change.

More specific goals of the co-development process included enhancing the cohort’s focus on most-at risk communities, increasing their overall effectiveness, and laying the foundations for on-the ground innovation and adaption. We also aimed to build the capacity of individuals and organisations, particularly to communicate on access to cooling challenges.

We ourselves hoped to gather information about frontline issues and the barriers innovators face, to feed the overarching communications element of the Fair Cooling Fund. And we hoped to gain a better understanding of co-development process, mindful of employing the approach again in the future.

The collaborative learning model we used supported core Ashden values, which we expected our cohort members to share – such as openness, willingness to learn and commitment to participatory approaches. The fact that affordable, sustainable cooling is a nascent area made collaboration even more crucial. Ashden and the cohort members were in many ways stepping into the unknown. By sharing intelligence, opportunities and feedback we could make our journey together. This co-development model was new to many of the organisations participating – as was the process of applying for charitable funding rather than commercial investment. But all entered into it enthusiastically.

Our activities included moments when we steered the group to consider questions essential to fair cooling – such as reaching marginalised groups, and empowering customers or beneficiaries – that might otherwise have gone unexplored. But we also created room for them to share their experiences, and raise issues in a wide variety of areas, from financing to communications. We aimed to guide, but not dictate, conversations. The structure of the year’s workshops and check-ins was created by Ashden and agreed by the cohort.





A fish processor in Ghana's volta region, where lack of access to cooling limits people's ability to earn a living. The Fair Cooling Fund's communications activities include commissioning original photography of communities at risk from extreme heat, which has appeared in high-profile platforms such as The Guardian – raising awareness of this global challenge. Credit: Nana Kofi Acquah/Ashden.

Design Choices

The team conducted a scoping exercise in March and April 2020 to aid the design of the grant-making process. This consisted of listening interviews with Ashden Cooling Award judges, applicants and team members involved in running the Ashden Awards, and other grant-funders. We quickly identified non-negotiable points: a strict eight-month timeline until grants were distributed, a wish to build Ashden's capacity to run similar projects in the future, and the fact this ground-breaking project would need to create all tools and resources from scratch. Our scoping exercise arrived at the following key design choices:



By planting vegetation throughout the city, Medellín's Green Corridors project has lowered urban temperatures by up to 4.5 Degrees Celsius. Now the team behind the initiative hope to spark similar projects in other cities. Credit: Ashden.

1.

A diverse cohort

We invested in a diverse spectrum of sustainable cooling initiatives: commercial and non-commercial, from a range of sectors and geographies, at different stages of development, and acting on different aspects of the cooling agenda.

Rationale: As well as expanding individual cooling initiatives, we sought to raise the profile of fair cooling as a development priority. This required a mix of projects and organisations that could contribute to a collective story about the global nature of the challenge, the complex and interlinked impacts of heat stress, and the immense potential of nascent solutions.

2.

A 'live' framework shaped by applicants themselves – and shared relationships between Ashden and cohort members

Our framework for the co-development process was shaped by feedback from its participants. We encouraged peer-to-peer contact and group interactions throughout, offering space for discussion and invitations to share ideas and challenges.

Rationale: Through their lived experience, applicants to the Fair Cooling Fund understand the challenges to scaling cooling in their own domains and localities. A synthesis of cohort members' knowledge, rather than Ashden's 'top-down' assessment, should frame and fuel efforts to tackle this issue. Cohort members' wisdom should not be extracted by Ashden, but used to immediately build collective capacity.

3.

An investigative journey, rather than a single event

Rationale: Creating impactful projects would require an enquiry drawing on the knowledge of Ashden and the funded organisations – no single party started the process with all the answers.

4.

Dialling up collaboration

Our process design combined listening, dialogue and consultation within a competitive application process – taking inspiration from start-up and incubator programmes.

Rationale: The short timeline for the project, set against the practical considerations of setting-up an investment process from scratch, led us to this combination. The competitive element made efficient use of the team's time and managed project risks by enabling us to borrow from the Ashden Awards approach.

5.

Capacity building for individuals and organisations

While funding was channelled to organisations rather than individuals, we chose to work with a small number of representatives from each organisation.

Rationale: Creating impact requires fair cooling champions – individuals immersed in the intersectional challenges posed by the issue, who can advocate for change in their organisation, sector or wider society.

6.

Support innovation and scaling

We supported innovation by giving fund applicants wide scope in the type of proposals they submitted, while a lengthy co-development process gave time and tools to explore ideas. However, scaling was the key ‘destination’ in the final grant agreements – either a route to scale for solutions themselves, or an outcome that would support scaling by others.

Rationale: Widening access to cooling demands the acceleration and refinement of nascent solutions, the creation of entirely new solutions, and work that builds a catalysing environment for fair cooling. Organisations following these different paths often face the same barriers – such as limited understanding of social impact or access to investment. This presents opportunities for those on all three paths to learn and advance together.

7.

Integrated communications

Ashden’s communications team were integrated into the Fair Cooling Fund project team, and heavily involved in the co-development process.

Rationale: Storytelling – to customers, investors, policymakers or wider society – is essential to any effort to widen access to cooling. Organisations would benefit from being upskilled in communications, and could use their insights to shape Ashden’s communications in this area.



Timeline of the process



Rural isolation makes it harder for farmers to enter supply chains. Technology and services from cohort member Promethean Power Systems are enabling milk chilling in more remote areas. Credit: Prashanth Vishwanathan/Ashden.

The Fair Cooling Fund innovators



cBalance, India

Grant amount: \$100,000

This pioneering consultancy is bringing academics, urban communities and others together to retrofit informal housing for improved thermal comfort. cBalance aims to drive systemic change by working with those at the grassroots – particularly women.



EConsult, Egypt

Grant amount: \$40,042

EConsult, a consultancy firm, is supporting a multi-billion pound national infrastructure and housing initiative. The organisation is creating resources and storytelling that helps government ministries and other stakeholders focus on sustainability, inclusivity and the integration of traditional knowledge.



Ecozen, India

Grant amount: \$100,000

This clean technology company enables a climate smart farm-to-fork value chain for perishables. Through the fund they are piloting a smaller version of their solar-powered cold storage room, to be offered alongside microfinance support and digital tools. This initiative will reduce the barriers to access cooling for small holder farmers, food growers and businesses.



MASS Design Group, Rwanda
Grant amount: \$50,000

This architecture firm is supporting cooler homes in low-income neighbourhoods through innovation in affordable, sustainable, locally-appropriate building methods and materials. They are using film and other communications tools to win support for these new approaches from Rwanda's government and consumers.



Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, Colombia
Grant amount: \$75,000

Academics from this Colombian university were integral to Medellin's green corridors project, which has lowered temperatures and delivered a host of social benefits through urban greening. Now they are developing and promoting an urban planning methodology to help other cities in Colombia – and ultimately the world – follow in their footsteps.



Promethean Power Systems, India
Grant amount: \$100,000

Promethean is pioneering a new service for chilling, processing and distributing milk and dairy products, in partnership with NGO Swayam Shikshan Prayog. This work will help small-scale farmers – many of them women – reach a wider range of markets and command a better price.



PEG Africa
Grant amount: \$99,995

Solar enterprise PEG Africa is bringing fridges and freezers to fish processors and other businesses in rural Ghana, using the grant to test different loan and product models. A key focus of their work is helping women earn a better living.

A learning journey

Cohort members were encouraged to record ideas and reflections sparked by Fair Cooling Fund calls and meetings in a project book. This included written notes and outputs like ‘empathy canvases’, created in the workshops to deepen understanding of each organisation’s customers or beneficiaries.

Use of these project books varied from organisation to organisation – but excerpts from one, belonging to PEG Africa, show some of the thoughts prompted by the co-development process.

- “Reducing food wastage is a key benefit of PEG’s cooling solution. We had not considered the sustainability angle to this degree.”
- “Focusing on ‘early adopters’ of the cooling solutions will help create ambassadors for scaling the programme more quickly.”
- “Any opportunity for community and group-based lending? One of our suppliers has a large freezer which could be ideal for this purpose. The challenge is getting this to fit our current PAYGO model but the FCF would be the perfect arena for exploring this potential extra opportunity.”



One third of all food grown worldwide is thrown away. Sustainable, portable cold storage from India's Ecozen helps producers tackle wastage of food – and flowers. Their new products and services are targeting lower-income farmers and growers. Credit: Ashden.

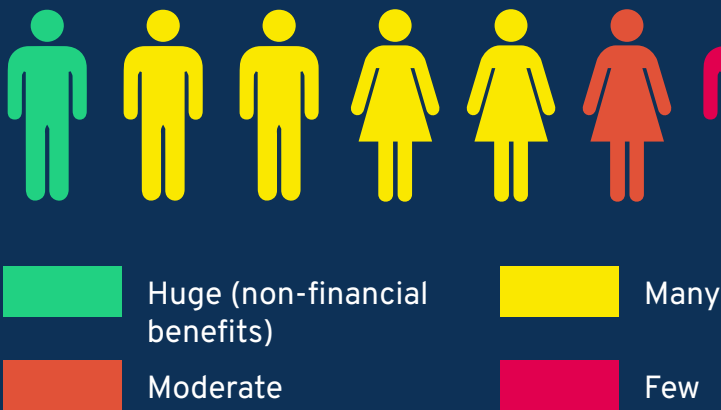
Feedback from our cohort

In late 2020, we surveyed the cohort members about their experiences of the Fair Cooling Fund.

How do you rate what you gained through the experience, against the time you invested?



To what extent did you gain ‘non-financial’ benefits - i.e. value beyond the grant-funding?



To what extent did you feel respected; that your interactions with Ashden were fair and transparent?



 Extremely respected  Very respected

To what extent did your project change as a result of the input you received from Ashden and the assessment partners?



 A lot  Considerably  Moderately

To what extent did your project change as a result of the input you received from other members of the Fair Cooling Fund cohort?



 A lot  Considerably
 Moderately  A little

Please describe one or two of the more significant changes you made?

“The proposal transformed from a toolkit to an advocacy campaign to increase our impact and spread our work to a larger audience to increase sustainable cooling access.”

— EConsult

“We shifted from a quantitative and regulatory approach to a more qualitative strategy focused on story-telling and influencing from the ground up through media and film.” — MASS Design

“The process helped us focus on key metrics that we should consider for longer term viability and sustainability, and how we can tailor our project to better serve and engage our intended beneficiaries.” — Promethean

“We refocused on replicating the urban planning methodology to reduce temperatures in other contexts, as a sustainable strategy to improve environmental conditions in cities with warming problems and social inequity, through the use of nature.” — Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana

“We made the project more academia-focused, and intensified the effort towards developing knowledge products suited for dissemination in other geographies and related contexts.” — cBalance

“No change in design and plan of our pilot. We will be focusing on creating a user profile of our customers during the pilot phase.” — Ecozen

What were the most difficult moments?

“The intricate project planning, preemptively envisioning external dependencies, and the enmeshed nature of multiple disciplines of thought and practice that our project requires.” — cBalance

“The constructive critical feedback we received after our draft proposal was difficult because we needed to get back to the drawing board and really re-think how and why we were going about creating change. Ultimately, the early feedback we received meant we learned a great deal about developing a clear theory of change and presenting compelling and convincing ideas.” — MASS Design

“Finding the most appropriate strategy to continue and replicate the Green Corridors project, and finding a stakeholder interested in the continuity of the project, or a city with environmental and social problems where it could be replicated.” — Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana

Please describe the most transformative moments?

“Understanding the stakeholder map gaps. The housing sector in Egypt has multiple actors involved. Understanding how our proposal fits within this chain and which holes we needed to address to ensure our proposal's success was essential.” — EConsult

“The workshops required that I was prepared to articulate our proposal to peers in a clear and concise manner, think carefully through the lens of the end users/beneficiaries, and accordingly refine our proposal.”
— Promethean

“The empathy canvas exercise, contemplation of co-benefits and service delivery model ideas, intensifying focus towards more realistic goals amongst the initial spectrum of aspirations for this effort, and the encouragement to include as many action-learning loops as feasible.” — cBalance



Medellin's Green Corridors project helped boost bicycle journeys in the city by 35% from 2016 to 2019. Credit: Ashden.

How could we improve the process to increase its benefit to you?

“The length of process, if shortened, would be great.”

— Ecozen

“Perhaps less writing at the beginning. Also, Ashden could help us expanding our voice and increasing our impact out to a bigger audience internationally” — ECOnsult

“Additional emphasis on incorporating user-centred design and sharpening the value proposition could be useful.” — Promethean



Without access to cooling, fishing communities in rural Ghana are often forced to smoke their catch. But smoking fish lowers its value, and drives deforestation and air pollution. Affordable, sustainable refrigeration from PEG Africa can deliver multiple benefits to local people. Credit: Nana Kofi Acquah/Ashden.

Cohort feedback: key themes

Feedback from the cohort highlights the many areas in which the fund process has challenged and shaped their thinking.

One is the extent to which it has encouraged them to engage more deeply with their role as storytellers. For some organisations, this has meant putting storytelling at the heart of the funded work – i.e focusing on a ‘campaign’ targeting the public or key stakeholders – but for others simply becoming more confident in communicating what they do and how it impacts customers or beneficiaries. While this can be partly explained by the suggestions and input of Ashden staff, it is also a result of them needing to share and explain their evolving thinking to Ashden, cohort peers and outside experts.

Cohort members also identified issues of strategic focus and theories of change as areas that had been brought to the fore by the process. And their feedback suggested we had facilitated thinking about external dependencies, the need to place work in a system context, the realism of their aspirations, and how partners could allow work to grow or be replicated. Generally, when surveyed about the impact of the fund process, the cohort referred to ‘big picture’ questions of scope and intention rather than more technical delivery issues.

In some cases, feedback illustrates how the process has not only facilitated reconsideration of high-level aims and objects, but also turned new directions into solid plans – for example, Medellin reports that through the Fair Cooling Fund workshops they have identified Barranquilla as the city with which to aim to replicate their Green Corridors project. This represents a significant shift from an initial proposal to develop academic literature around the project.

Other notable themes include considering the potential application of work in different geographic locations, and using co-benefits and the beneficiary experience as lenses for exploring project impact. This final point is a key area for exploration in the second year of the fund process.

Reflections from The Ashden Fair Cooling Fund team

The Fair Cooling Fund is a new model for Ashden, one that expands our role supporting the growth in impact of organisations tackling climate, cooling and equity issues. Our other vehicles for support include awards, networks and programmes (including working with investors).

Through the Fair Cooling Fund, we sought to develop a new approach that would go beyond the support of individual organisations and do more to pursue systemic change. This was only possible because of the immense trust placed in us by K-CEP, who funded us in a way that created freedom to experiment and explore. We are delighted to have passed this freedom onto our cohort members through the Fair Cooling Fund process.

The fund has been a unique and exciting opportunity, bringing us closer to truly inspiring people and organisations. We have relished the platform for creativity it offers, and the chance to create a new network bonded by shared values. The growth of warmth and common purpose across the group has been remarkable to watch.

While our approach has challenged us in a range of ways, we have gained valuable insights at all levels – from strategic issues to the day-to-day practicalities of employing such a method.

Design, application and selection

As a team, we considered and decided-upon a design and a vision of success – underpinned by a theory of change that was new and distinct from the Ashden Awards. This was an uncomfortable experience for the team at times. As an action-oriented organisation, there was a cultural discomfort with delving so deep into the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of our investments, and a desire to concentrate on delivering results. Would making this space for consideration and reflection pay off?

The decision to invite applications from organisations known to Ashden was driven by practical considerations – speeding the re-granting process, and allowing us to build on existing relationships – as well as a need to ensure participation from innovative, impactful organisations that share the values of the Fair Cooling Fund. However, we recognise that our approach reflects some of the structural bias of the Ashden network and awards process – for example, an elevation of organisations able to work in English. A more open process, while more practically difficult, would address some of these issues.

We have also reflected on the need for decisive, early action in the selection process. This includes ruling out organisations with low potential early on, and potentially requiring applicants to come with a more fully-realised plan in the project’s initial stages. In a bid to make the process as accessible as possible, we created a relatively open application framework that did not demand masses of detail, or necessarily steer applicants towards specifics – but this may have lengthened the early stages of the fund programme, which is a particular concern for unsuccessful applicants.



India is urbanising fast – but 65% of its people live in rural areas. Village-level milk chilling from Promethean is connecting farmers to national supply chains.

Also vital is gaining an early understanding of participants' skills, resources and previous experience (this includes individuals as well as whole organisations – in the model we have pursued, a huge amount hinges on the personalities taking part). Numerous applicants were prepared to suggest work that included elements significantly outside of their experience (perhaps unsurprising, when a grant of up to \$100,000 is possible). These movements can often bring exciting innovation, and can create a step change in the organisation's potential – indeed, they may be integral to the goal of scaling up cooling innovation. But organisations making such a transition will often require more support, and they present a higher risk of failure. In assembling a cohort, it may be worth balancing their presence with organisations undertaking more familiar work.

The early stages of the fund saw us frequently asking applicants to produce written submissions. More than once, we nearly asked organisations for information they had previously supplied. We learned that streamlining this process and avoiding repetition is vital.

Working with the cohort

Our plans made assumptions that organisations would be, to a certain extent, familiar and comfortable with a grant-making process focused on social impact – though this was not necessarily the case. We found that the individuals involved in the process had varying degrees of personal experience with writing proposals and familiarity with the language and ways of thinking associated with grant-funding. This capacity may be entirely absent in organisations without a dedicated fund-raising capacity. Notably, we discovered that none of the participants were experienced in developing and articulating theories of change. This is an important foundation for producing robust and feasible plans, and for successfully linking communications work with other impacts.

With limited understanding of each cohort member's context, our ability to work generatively with them was constrained. We reflected that the earlier stage of the application process could be strengthened through a more structured 'capturing' of the assumptions behind the project ideas. This would have produced a better foundation for the collaborative process. A short proposal application form built around a logframe approach, for example, may have produced a more efficient and creative process. However, it may also have excluded organisations unfamiliar with this approach.

As Ashden looks ahead to future projects, we are considering how to ensure we fully explain our expectations of a fundable proposal, and how to ensure inclusivity by supporting organisations not already practiced in writing proposals for charitable funding. In summary, we have learned that early clarity around an applicant's context and proposed theory of change is vital – but that many organisations will need significant support in order to produce this.

Another important point relates ‘co-operation versus competition.’ Running a collaborative process with a group largely made up of private companies meant that we had to be mindful of competing commercial interests in the selection of the cohort, and avoid requiring organisations to reveal sensitive, proprietary information. Our selection process considered participants’ inclination and likelihood to collaborate with others in a diverse group. While organisations were careful about what they disclosed, the process has built trust between cohort members and sparked dialogue and cooperation.

Another key point relates to Ashden’s role as both collaborator and assessor, and the impact on power dynamics this generated. While we encouraged organisations to submit the plan they believed would work best, the structure of the fund gave cohort members a clear incentive to agree with our preferences and feedback in order to receive the maximum investment. While this is a risk in all grant giving relationships, the high frequency of feedback from Ashden to the cohort may have amplified its effect.

With regards to the fund’s reception within Ashden, a key moment came when the project was advanced enough for the Fair Cooling Fund team to explain it in detail to internal stakeholders during a ‘brown bag lunch’ informal meeting. This significantly increased buy-in – and reminded us that innovative projects can be opaque to others in an organisation.

The external experts who worked with us gave us and cohort members insights on a wide range of topics – from the importance of scalability to funders, to advice on working with farmers’ co-operatives, to the effectiveness of different communication platforms. But with limited time to explore the cohort members plans, their ability to truly assess these proposals – a key reason for bringing outside experts into the process – was restricted.

Working with a diverse group

The organisations involved in the co-development process were located in four different continents, and five countries and climate zones. They varied widely in size, expertise and experience in making grant applications. Their projects engaged in multiple domains that are relevant for addressing heat stress in society: from urban design and architecture, mobility services, cold chain services, academia, sustainability consultancy – and grant-making. We believed that this composition of organizations and projects could best demonstrate the many ways extreme heat touches people’s lives, the cross-cutting implications, and the conditions needed to widen access to cooling and heat-avoidance.

This diversity amongst our group needed careful tending during our work together. One of the more surprising challenges we encountered, given that all but one of the organisations spoke an excellent standard of business English, was the difficulty of communicating with one another when our cultural norms, business jargon and expectations were very different. This showed itself most clearly in the offering and receiving of feedback and in our conversations about money. There were moments when Ashden’s attempts to offer polite, constructive feedback came across as ambiguous.

There were times when our attempts to share power – rather than making directive decisions ourselves - left organisations uncertain about our expectations and wondering if there was a hidden ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ response. For instance, in our discussions with SMV Green about whether to proceed to the final stage of the process, we chose to invite them to step back before submitting a final proposal, rather than requiring this. The SMV Green team decided to proceed to the finish line and were ultimately unsuccessful. Did they make this decision believing that they really could choose to withdraw without negative consequence – or did they feel obliged to persevere?

Communications

Communicating the need for fair cooling, the existence of fair cooling solutions, and the steps need to scale them up, is integral to the Fair Cooling Fund. Our 2020 cooling communications included a report, Fair Cooling Now, highlighting innovation unearthed from the 2020 Ashden Cooling Award discovery process, and thought leadership from Ashden staff targeting key audiences such as policymakers and philanthropic funders.

Ashden’s communications team also helped the cohort members develop the communications aspects of their work. Significantly, the co-development process educated the team in sustainable cooling issues and gave them a bond with the cohort members that will boost communications activity for the length of the initiative.

Providing a platform for frontline voices is a key aspect of our communications approach. This proved difficult in 2020, with no on-the-ground work to highlight and the cohort focused on developing their plans. However, the centring of social impact in the final proposals has created huge potential for frontline storytelling (and a firm understanding of the value of such storytelling among the cohort).

On reflection we may have been wiser to limit almost all the project’s outward-facing communications to its second year, allowing us to deploy communications resources more strategically and with a greater emphasis on frontline voices.

We have a busy calendar of activities planned for 2021, with high-impact photography and film pieces supporting news stories and features centred around the frontline experiences of heat stress and cooling innovation. This output will include numerous stories from end-users and beneficiaries, as well as thought leadership from our innovators – ensuring we are ultimately successful in our goal of amplifying these voices.



A Fair Cooling Fund grant is allowing Ecozen to develop and pilot a smaller version of their Ecofrost storage unit. Credit: Ashden.

Conclusion

The Fair Cooling Fund co-development process has been a stretching one for Ashden and our fund cohort. From Ashden's perspective we faced a challenge to draw together a hugely diverse group of organisations, to understand their contexts and thinking, and to deliver input that pushed their proposals forward. Issues faced by our cohort members include embracing new thinking that maximises the social impact of their work, and in some cases proposing work rooted in unfamiliar areas, audiences, or change mechanisms.

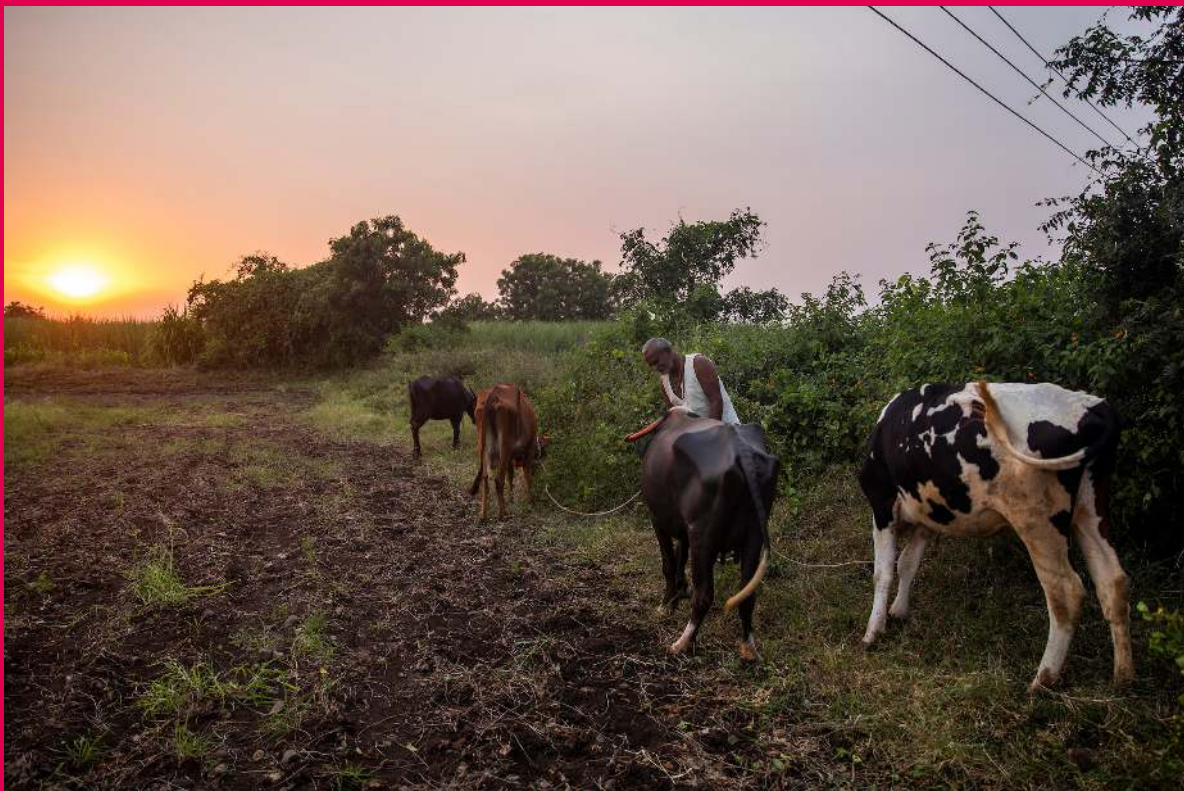
The final plans created by each cohort member are firmly centred on in the task of widening access to sustainable cooling. Our initial proposal spoke of nurturing 'disruptive' organisations with the potential to achieve significant impact – again, the final grant agreements are strongly in line with this goal. However, the innovative and boldly inclusive nature of these plans means the path to scaling them up is at times unclear.

This reflects a key lesson from our co-development process – that existing approaches and business models offering sustainable cooling cannot simply be 'dialled up' in order to reach those most at risk. Tweaking or tinkering is rarely sufficient – in many cases an entirely new mindset, contextual understanding or collection of foundational values is required. This applies to all parties involved: from funders and grant-givers to frontline organisations.

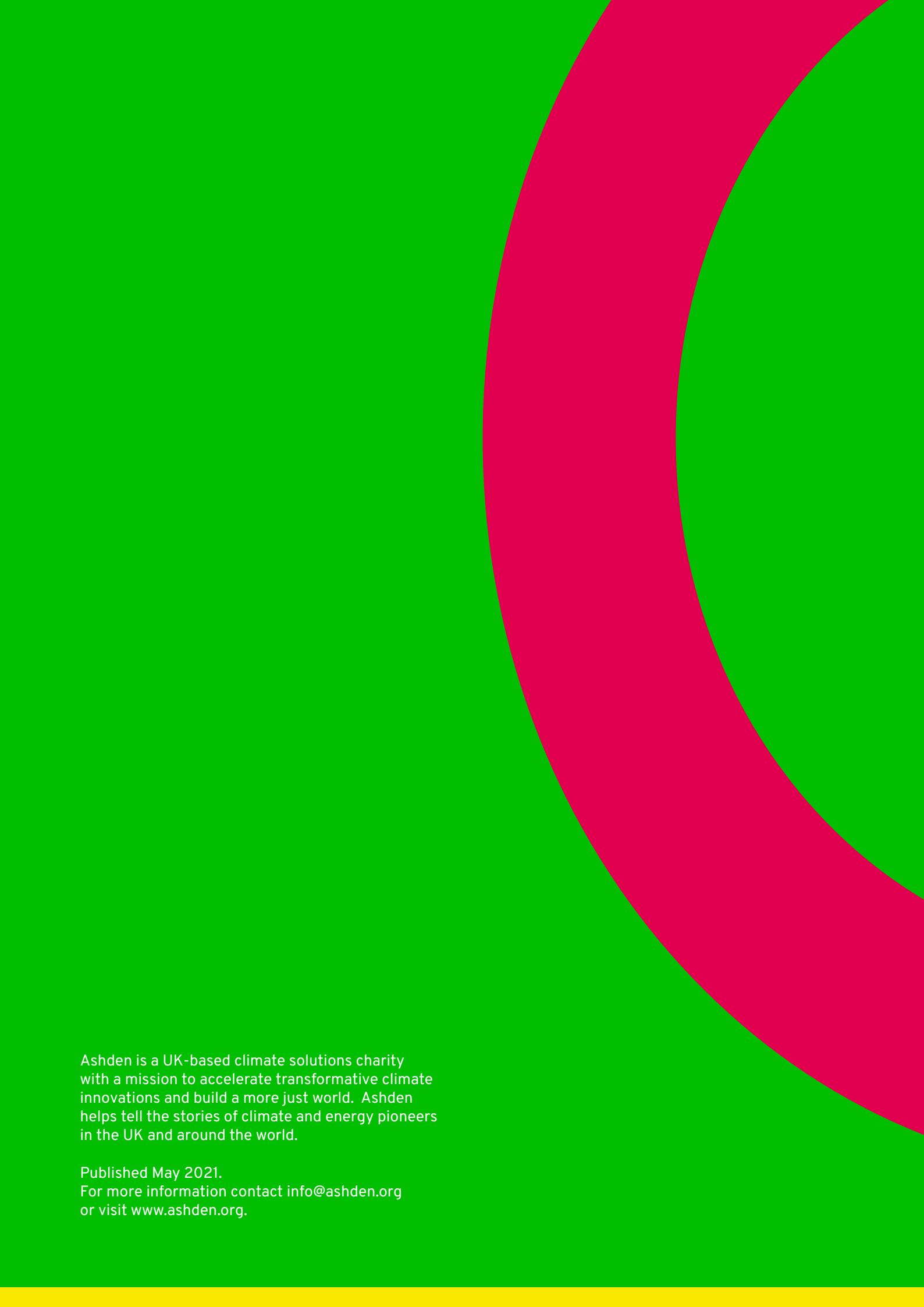
Globally, widening access to cooling will require the efforts of a much larger constellation of organisations and individuals than are currently tackling the problem. But as this collective grows, organisations within it must bonded by shared understanding and purpose.

The Fair Cooling Fund has undoubtedly furthered this work. What's more, feedback from our cohort confirms the fund's co-development process has opened the door to the growth of exciting cooling initiatives, with the power to deliver extraordinary social and environmental benefits alongside lower emissions. We believe that greater investment and dialogue in similar processes would unlock many more initiatives achieving multiple outcomes, and further expand the constellation of changemakers mentioned above.

At Ashden, we have carefully absorbed the lessons of the co-development approach – and look forward to applying them in future projects addressing this immense global challenge.



65 year old Lakshman Srirang Jadhav tends to his two cows and one buffalo. He bought them because of the arrival of a Promethean bulk milk collection centre in his village of Pomadevi Jawalga, Maharashtra. Credit: Prashanth Vishwanathan/Ashden.



Ashden is a UK-based climate solutions charity with a mission to accelerate transformative climate innovations and build a more just world. Ashden helps tell the stories of climate and energy pioneers in the UK and around the world.

Published May 2021.
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