CSO TOOLKIT

AGENTS FOR CITIZEN-DRIVEN TRANSFORMATION (ACT)

PROPOSAL WRITING

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The Proposal Writing Toolkit is produced as a resource to support capacity development of the CSOs that are participating in the implementation of the EU funded Agents for Citizen-Driven Transformation (ACT) Programme in Nigeria. The content and materials used to develop the Toolkit were sourced and modified from existing open access third-party material, which is referenced below.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this Toolkit is to provide support to those Civil Society Organisations (CSOs[1]) who have developed their organisational strategic plan and fundraising strategy and are seeking donor funds to help fulfil its planned vison, mission, and objectives.

This Toolkit deals with planning and researching a funding proposal; and how to write the actual proposal. You will find advice on what you need to know about donors, and what you need to know about your own project or organisation before you write a funding proposal. You will also find guidance on what to put into your proposal and some tips to follow and common pitfalls to avoid. References and other ACT resources are referred to throughout this Toolkit that can help you further.

This Toolkit is aimed mainly at those CSOs and writers who are not necessarily very experienced and may not feel confident about writing funding proposals. It has been written in such a way that it can be used by an individual project manager or by the whole team, observing that the best funding proposals are generally written by teams. This guide cannot make up for the actual experience of writing a proposal, but we hope that the resource will be a good additional tool for those CSOs who have already completed relevant ACT training programmes.

In line with ACT's commitment to Human Rights and Gender and Social Inclusion, it is anticipated that CSOs' projects and plans demonstrate the mainstreaming of Gender and Social Inclusion (G&SI) and the adoption of a Rights-based Approach.

The ACT programme supports CSOs to collaborate through its Peer Learning Programme. This collaboration can erode any lack of trust, build a culture of shared learning and support, and together CSOs can better meet the resource challenges that face them.

[1] For CSOs please read: CSOs, CBOs or CS Networks

INTRODUCTION

Proposal writing alone is not the key to a successful funding strategy, but it is certainly a major part of it. A strong proposal that meets the donors' criteria, highlights the strengths of your organisation, while differentiating it from others, will always be well received by a donor. However, submitting good proposals isn't sufficient to develop a long-term, sustainable funding stream. ACT has developed a Fundraising Strategy Toolkit that will help CSOs to think through and plan a much broader fundraising approach.

The process of project and programme development and the art of proposal writing need therefore to be part of something more holistic. They are aspects of a strategy that incorporate networking and strategic positioning, as well as thought leadership and a demonstration of impact. Consider it as a part of a wider approach to positioning your CSO, not only for acquiring funding, but for creating impact, as part of your broader mission. See the ACT Toolkit on Strategic Planning for further guidance on this. This Toolkit however focusses wholly on writing a fundraising proposal to a donor.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

ACT encourages exploring alternative funding streams, but also acknowledges that the capacity to attract donor funds through writing successful grant applications remains at the centre of a successful CSO's work. Mostly, donor funds are used to fund specific time-bound projects but it is important also to identify donors who commit to supporting the core costs of CSOs. You will usually need to write a different kind of funding application for these opportunities, but the principles of writing a "good proposal" are the same.

Writing a funding proposal is complex and time consuming. It should not be rushed! Under no circumstances should a CSO start to write a funding proposal before they have done the necessary research, consultation and planning. ACT has developed several toolkits that will guide CSOs on critical issues for developing their proposal, including **project cycle management, the logical framework and gender and social inclusion (G&SI).**

A funding proposal forms the basis of a CSO's relationship with a donor. If the donor can see that the proposal is hastily written, and without necessary thought and planning, it is unlikely that the donor will take the proposal any further. This is a highly competitive field, meaning every CSO needs to be able stand out from the crowd. It is critical that a CSO gives the impression from the outset to potential donors that they are thorough and professional and that they will be good custodians of the donor's money.

Therefore, before writing a single page of the proposal, it is important to appreciate all the tools a CSO requires to get started. Before beginning the job of writing, check you are:

1. Clear about why and for whom you are writing the proposal
2. Aware of donor for whom you are preparing it, and respond directly to what is being asked for by the donor/funder, follow their application guidelines and ensure submission by their deadline date.
3. Clear about your own organisation – its mission, its goals, its capabilities (or its 'strengths' and 'weaknesses')
4. Able to present a credible track record – or a very convincing pitch if your track record is limited
5. Able to bring together all the necessary planning and skills required to prepare a strong proposal

Know why are you writing a proposal?

Although this sounds obvious – you are writing a proposal to attract funding – careful thought should go into whether it is the right approach for your CSO before it is written and submitted (note above – a poorly written proposal can be very off-putting for donors and may impact your future chances of success too).

There are many reasons why you may have decided that the best fundraising method for your CSO or your CSO's project is through a donor (which may be an international donor, a domestic donor, a philanthropic body, a research agency or a corporate company, among others – we cover 'know your donor' next). Those reasons may include:

- Large sums of money are required to deliver the project and cannot be achieved without donor contributions
- Diversification of your funding streams is essential to aid sustainability of your CSO
- The intended project is a strong fit within a broader

[2] Adapted from Shapiro, Janet: Writing a Funding Proposal; CIVICUS. Accessed through www.ngoconnect.net).

framework of national, regional or international development, in which donors are already active and that one or more donors are seeking to support CSOs as 'local actors'

But before committing to go ahead and seek donor funds, be sure that this is the best route for acquiring funds for your particular CSO or a particular project. Are there better suited alternatives you can consider, for example:

- Raising money within the community/communities that you intend to support? This could generate real ownership and empowerment
- Using money that the organisation has generated itself through investment, or earned income, or through social enterprise?

ACT has prepared a Fundraising Strategy Toolkit, in which wider fundraising approaches, opportunities and methods are discussed.

Know your own CSO

It may sound obvious, but knowing your own organisation, including its relative strengths and challenges, is imperative for making a funding application. Trying to over-reach, by asking for more money than the CSO has ever managed before[3], or claiming expertise in a field that the CSO has limited experience of working in, or claiming that your CSO can achieve incredible results will not be well received by a donor. If your proposal seems too good to be true, the donors will think so too. Be very clear and honest about:

- Who you are, what your identity, vision, mission, and values are – be ready to present and defend them
- What your strengths are (and therefore, are not) – a tool such as a SWOT analysis could be helpful in defining this (any 'weaknesses' you identify can be used as opportunities to strengthen for future funding attempts)
- Your experience, or 'track record' – what have you done, where, when, for whom? And more importantly, what did you achieve? Donors will always follow up, so be honest
- What expertise and experience your staff and Trustees have? Maybe staff have experience from other projects or organisations that could be attractive to the new donor? Do you have all the skills your CSO needs for the project it is applying for - technical, administrative, financial, managerial?

PLANNING YOUR PROJECT

This section relates mainly to conceptualizing (and planning) the intended project. It aims only to provide outline guidance to the steps that should be taken as part of the process of developing a proposal. For more detailed guidance on this, see **ACT Toolkits on Strategic Planning, Project Cycle Management and Gender & Social Inclusion.**

Before writing anything down, the initial step should be to plan the project. In doing so, it is critical to make a strong link between your CSO's mission and values and the specific project.

The projects that any CSO plans and requests funding for should align with its strategy, and not be just a way to raise money. A CSO's project plan should therefore reflect:

- Its understanding of the context, its constituents and how this is reflected in the organisation's mission and strategy
- The specific circumstances in the context that create the problem the project is being designed to address. This should be grounded in a participatory analysis process that identifies: what that problem is; and how the problem differentially impacts women, men, girls, boys, people with disabilities (PWDs) and other marginalised people
- The objectives of the project – what part of the problem the project and CSO can address
- The processes intended to achieve the objectives (the activities)
- How you will know whether the objectives are being met (monitoring, evaluation and learning)

See the additional **ACT Toolkit on Project Cycle Management** for guidance on how to plan and design a coherent project.

PROPOSALS AND CONCEPT NOTES

Proposals and concept notes are different products but are closely linked. A concept note is a brief expression of the main points of your project idea, whereas the proposal will

[3] All funders will want to see proof of your experience and ability to manage the kind of money you are asking for. Many will set limits for funding CSOs, for example, by not making more than 40% of average annual turnover for the previous three years available.

be a much more detailed description of what you will do and achieve if funded. However, as the concept note will most often be the document by which you are invited to submit your full proposal, it is critical that the two documents are closely aligned. Donors will rarely accept a deviation from the original idea expressed in your concept note, unless there have been significant changes in the context since submission (eg natural disasters, health pandemics, conflict, etc).

Concept Notes

Donors will usually ask for a concept note before requesting a full proposal submission, which gives them the opportunity to sift out those ideas they feel most interested by. This is certainly the case in for European Commission (EC), FCDO[4] and USAID funding. When making an unsolicited 'pitch', a brief concept note should also be considered as an essential part of the CSO's approach. Most donor agencies prefer to understand the project through a concept note rather than a full proposal. This provides efficiency for the donor and the CSO alike.

The concept note is your initial step in applying to the donor agency for funding. If the idea is interesting, you may be requested to submit a full proposal. In some cases, as is the case with the EC[5], a concept note can be highly structured and will require in-depth information about the intended project. In some other cases, it may just be a 2 or 3-page overview of the project idea. Most donors have their own templates and requirements; the key rule is to always follow the donors' guidance. Whilst there is no standard content or structure for a donor concept note, common content includes is shown in **Table 1.**

- Name of the applying organisation and key contact information
- Title of the project
- Problem analysis and rationale for the proposed project
- Intended goals and objectives (or outcomes and outputs)
- Expected results
- Project strategy and main anticipated activities
- Risks and assumptions
- Organisational expertise and experience.
- Budget estimate[6]

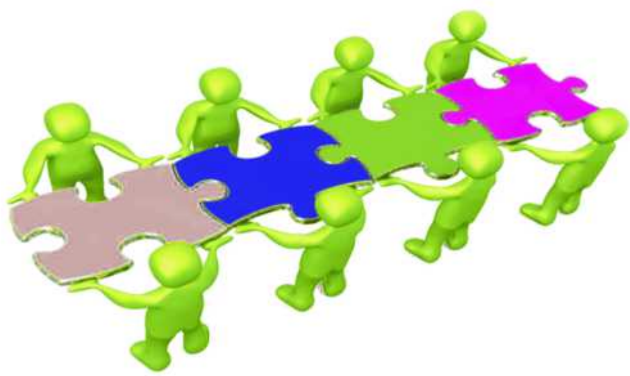
Throughout the contents listed in Table 1, CSOs must ensure that their concept notes mainstream G&SI. Women, girls, men and boys, PWDs and many other traditionally excluded groups experience problems differently. You will need to demonstrate even at this stage that your CSO understands this and has designed interventions that promote inclusion and do no harm. See the ACT Toolkits on **Gender and Social Inclusion** for more ideas on how to build G&SI into your projects and proposals.

Annex 2 contains the current concept note content requirements for the EC as an example of the requirements of an institutional donor. However, always check current requirements with the donor first though, as these things change.

PREPARING A PROPOSAL

Introduction

Good planning is key. It is important to have a clear proposal lead. Proposal writing is typically a team effort but someone needs to pull it all together, and there needs to be a consistent style throughout the document. Adequate time should have been given both to planning the project idea and to planning for writing the proposal itself. Preparing a concept note also requires time and detailed planning in collaboration with stakeholders. In fact, time well invested in this stage will be amply paid back during the proposal writing stage. If you have done all the preliminary work, this part of the proposal writing should go well! How you write the proposal will largely depend on the requirements of the donor.



[4] UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (formerly DFID)

[5] The standard format for EC concept notes can be found at https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/europeaid/online-services/index.cfm?do=publi.welcome&nbPubliList=15&orderby=upd&orderbyad=Desc&searchtype=RS&apply=N&aofr=172967&userlanguage=en.

[6] See https://www2.fundsforngos.org/cat/develop-budget-project-proposal/ fundsforngos.org also provides free resources on writing proposals and concept notes: see https://www.fundsforngos.org/concept-note/how-to-write-a-concept-note/#:~:text=A%20Concept%20Note%20is%20perhaps,than%20a%20full%2Dfledged%20proposal https://www2.fundsforngos.org/featured/quick-guide-write-powerful-concept-notes/ https://www2.fundsforngos.org/featured/a-simple-step-by-step-guide-for-ngos-on-how-to-write-proposals/

The most common formats required by donors include:

- **A standard proposal format** established by the donor. This would cover much the same areas as those discussed in the previous section, as well as those discussed in this section. In these cases, you will need to fit what you have already planned under the donor's set headings. It is worth getting familiar with the different and specific language individual donors such as the EC, USAID and FCDO use to describe much the same thing. (The ACT Logframe Toolkit provides some heading alternatives preferred by donors.) It is important to observe any requirements such as maximum page lengths or word counts (overall, or by section).
- **A standard form** into which your details need to be entered. This provides no option for flexibility and is thus far more restricting than a standard format. Almost invariably there will be a maximum word or even character count, after which it is not possible to input more.
- **Your own format.** This should enable you to present your planning and thinking to its best advantage. However, and perhaps surprisingly, this is the most difficult kind of proposal for many CSOs to write. There will likely (but not necessarily) be guidance from the donor on the kind of content they're seeking, but otherwise it is up to you to decide what to say, how to say it, in what order to say it, how long to make it and what annexes you should add. Although less common than the other formats, donor programmes that are contracted to fund managers (companies) may be more likely to allow free formats than institutional funders (EU, USAID, etc). Remember that less is more. Focus on the key substance of the proposal and relevant experience, and don't repeat what has already been said in different words. See following sections and Annex 2 for further guidance on what to include.

Note that some donors may also ask for a presentation of your project, with or without slides. Some challenge funds are based on investment pitching approaches, whereby CSOs are invited to 'make a pitch' (usually with a strictly limited time in which to do so). And donors seeking proposals for 'impact investment' will want to see very clear data and evidence about your claims before they will consider funding you. However you are ultimately required to make your application though, the project planning process described in this Toolkit is critical to all of them. A great presentation will not make up for a lack of substance.

In the rest of this section, we focus on a 'typical' proposal format, as it is impossible to discuss every type of donor format a CSO is likely to encounter. Nonetheless, the guidance offered is relevant to any proposal you will write.

Contents of a typical proposal

Although donor requirements and formats vary, the type of content sought is fairly consistent. The example below in Table 2 of suggested content and structure is offered as a guide to what most proposals will require, in some format and is discussed further in this section. Annex 1 provides a more detailed suggested contents list. Donor guidelines must always be followed, but the general contents in Table 2 below could be used or adapted where no donor guidance is provided.

Table 2. Common or typical contents of a CSO proposal

Introduction	Body	Annexes
• Title page and organisational details • CSO's registration details • Timeline for the project • Location(s) of the project to be funded • Total sum being requested • Contact details of two referees • Depending on the donor to whom you are applying, it may be necessary to provide other items, such as an executive summary, or a contents page, or abbreviations used in the proposal (always limit these)	• Context / situation / problem analysis • G&SI is mainstreamed throughout the body of the proposal • Project objectives – *what* will the project address? What will be its key results (note wide variety of language used by donors for this); the human rights the project addresses • Overall strategy - *how* will you deliver the objectives? How will you leverage other inputs? How will the project be sustained? Who are the key stakeholders the project will engage with? • Activities and outputs (or 'the action' as defined by the EU) – *what* will you actually do to realise the objectives/results? What will be delivered? • Workplan – summary schedule of activities and who will be responsible. What will you do when, and what order? Show dependencies (note this may be included as an annex) • Monitoring evaluation and learning (MEL) – key details of your approach to MEL including the numbers of direct and indirect beneficiaries and how data will be G&SI disaggregated • Details of how project learning will be disseminated and communicated to others • Risk analysis and mitigation • Staffing – which key staff are responsible for the project; briefly profile key staff/trustees (only if they will be genuinely involved) • Organisational experience and expertise to deliver the project successfully • *Budget summary (drawn from detailed and finalised full budget)*	Annexes of many sorts may be required and / or attached (noting that if a donor does *not* request something in their call for proposals, you should *not* include it). Typically, annexes may include: • Detailed budget (in the donor's format or your own, as appropriate) • Logical framework • Detailed workplan (often presented as a GANTT chart) • Copy of most recent audited accounts / auditor's management letter • Copies of certificates or policies (finance, human resources, safeguarding, counter terrorism, conflict of interest, counter money-laundering, environmental sustainability, etc, etc) • Detailed track record of the organisation • Curricula vitae of key staff

The suggested contents in Table 2, including annexes, are not exhaustive and individual donors may have specific additional requirements that you must include – for example, some may require a theory of change. The golden rule is to follow all instructions and, when the donor provides a template, it must be used, and completion of section headings and sub-headings adhered to.

G&SI needs to be mainstreamed throughout the proposal: analysis needs to highlight if and why the particular problem more greatly impacts women or people with disability (for example); how you will ensure that the project equitably involves women, youth, people with disability or other marginalised people; how the project will benefit women, youth, people with disability or other marginalised people; and how you will measure that it is doing so. A section 'on gender' is not good enough. (See the ACT Toolkit on G&SI for further information on using a G&SI lens, G&SI mainstreaming and G&SI analysis.)

Depending on the donor or the programme to which a CSO is applying, other details may be required. For example:

- Innovation: demonstrating how your project is different to other or earlier projects
- Sustainability: demonstrating how your project will be sustained after the lifetime of the donor's funding
- Environmental / climate change impacts: demonstrating how your project will leave a positive environmental legacy; or at least will not lead to environmental harm
- Safeguarding and other organisational policies: evidence of organisational policies to protect vulnerable people, particularly minors (see the ACT Safeguarding Policy Toolkit)
- Proof of policies to prevent money laundering and compliance with relevant counter-terrorism legislation/policies

The body of the proposal – what to include

The body of the proposal is where you have the real opportunity to impress the donor that you have all the necessary ideas, experience and institutional support to deliver a project that will make a difference to the community/communities in which it will be delivered and will represent a good investment for the donor. The key areas that you need to cover here - and for which you must have done the preparatory work (regardless of the donor's requirements or formats) are:

- Context / situational analysis / problem analysis
- Project objectives and intended results
- Intended activities to achieve the objectives
- Monitoring evaluation and learning

This toolkit focuses on what to include in your proposal and not the designing of a project. There are many other ACT Toolkits (see references section) that provide a lot of guidance and ideas to help with strong project design, with detailed content on:

- How to undertake a context analysis and what should be researched
- How to design a project and develop its hierarchy of objectives
- How to build G&SI into all elements of project planning and delivery
- How to develop and cost activities that are suited to solving the problem
- How to prepare a logical framework
- How to undertake robust and accountable monitoring evaluation and learning

Context / situational analysis / problem analysis

This section of the proposal will demonstrate that your CSO has a clear understanding of the context and that you have taken the time to conduct research, that the project is grounded in the needs of the beneficiaries and based on participatory planning with beneficiaries and other key stakeholders. Depending on the size and complexity of your project, you may need to consider local, State or Federal contexts that impact on the subject of your work and demonstrate how you will work with each of these.

So what....?

It is not sufficient to just state the context. Your section should demonstrate your understanding of why the context is as it is and what implications this has for the people and communities with which you plan to work. Moreover, you will need to demonstrate the link between the context and the overall mission and objectives of your organisation, as outlined in your CSO's strategy, and of the donor. Why will working on this particular problem, in this/these particular locations help to deliver sustainable benefits for people? In other words, **you should answer the 'so what' question.**

Some tips:

- Avoid lengthy narratives that simply present 'the situation' – ensure analysis alongside context (see box above), providing evidence that the project planning has been a participatory process, and is based on evidence of need and appropriateness of the approach to be taken
- Do not repeat context information provided by the donor, unless strongly connected to your own original thinking and ideas
- Think about how political structures, (including traditional authorities, chiefdoms, religious leaders), politicians and other elites will support or inhibit your planned work
- Ensure that you factor in G&SI (addressing reasons for exclusion) issues to your analysis – explain how and why does the problem affect women or girls, children, youth, PWDs, indigenous people, or people living with HIV (for example) differently?
- You should demonstrate knowledge of who else is working in the area on similar issues, what has been achieved and what has stalled – show how you will use this learning and add value and provide evidence that this project will complement, rather than duplicate, the work of another CSO
- Keep it simple and concise – any reader should grasp your points. It is not an academic exercise
- Use your context analysis to prepare a risk register to demonstrate an understanding of potential risks in that location, with details of how you plan to mitigate against these should they occur (see ACT Toolkit on Risk Assessment and Management)

Project objectives and intended results

The objectives are your upfront statement of what you expect the project to achieve at the higher level – its results - and what the impact of the project will be. Note that different donors use different language to describe the titles in the hierarchy of objectives, eg: impact/goal, outcomes/purpose, outputs/results, actions/activities and you should always use the terms as used by the donor[7]. You should be clear who the intended beneficiaries of your project are and, where possible, how many will directly benefit and how the benefits will be equitably distributed.

It is important that the Objectives are measurable, and for this reason you must make them SMART so that you will be able to assess progress towards achievement of the objective. In addition, each objective should have at least one qualitative and one quantitative Indicator that will provide evidence of the achievement, and the means of verification, eg: the source to verify the change the achievement has brought.

This is also a good section to mention the potential impact in terms of the replicability or scalability of your initiative and its overall sustainability. If donors can see that you have already considered how their investment may be grown beyond the life of the project, this may be attractive to them. It is useful to show that you have already thought about how your organisation will withdraw from the project in a way that enables benefits to be retained.

SMART Indicators

Be specific and focussed in how you articulate your objectives and results. Terms such as 'improving the wellbeing of people in the community' don't convey anything helpful. Instead use SMART indicators. For example: by the end of the project in 3 years' time, 25% more land by hectare in {named location} will be sustainably farmed; or at the end of the project in 3 years' time, absence from school by girls aged 12-18 {in named location} will have reduced by 20%.

This is also a good section to mention the potential impact in terms of the replicability or scalability of your initiative and its overall sustainability. If donors can see that you have already considered how their investment may be grown beyond the life of the project, this may be attractive to them. It is useful to show that you have already thought about how your organisation will withdraw from the project in a way that enables benefits to be retained.

Some tips:

Be clear and succinct – the receiving donor should be able to quickly understand what your project can be expected to achieve if they fund it. Consider that your donor may be reading numerous proposals. Make sure yours stands out.

Always match the donor's chosen language for describing objectives, or goals, or impact, or outcomes etc.

Don't exaggerate what you will achieve. Be ambitious, but realistic (better to over-achieve than to under-achieve).

[7] The EC for example uses the terms: overall objectives and specific objectives. USAID uses the terms Project Goal and Development Objective and FCDO uses the terms impact and outcomes.

Intended strategy and activities to achieve the objectives

Strategy and activities are different. One is the means by which the other is accomplished. This section must clarify for the donor what your overall strategy is for this specific project. Your overall strategy may, for example, be based on training or capacity development, or may focus on advocacy and influence, or may focus on awareness raising through campaigning and messaging. Chances are your overall strategy will incorporate a mix of different strategic approaches – and you should briefly present them here.

To deliver the objectives you will conduct activities which will generate a sequence of expected outputs. In this case, if training 150 subsistence farmers on sustainable land management is one of your intended means of achieving the objective, you should describe how you will go about this (eg workshops, coaching, mentoring, peer to peer learning, provision of tools or other inputs, etc). How will you select the famers? How will you ensure women are part of the training? How will you check whether the training has been understood and is being applied, etc?

It is very likely that your project will use a lot of activities and will plan for many outputs or deliverables. A workplan that shows the whole scheme of work and its sequencing can be a very useful tool to include here, and many donors require it (and have a specific format for it – always check). Depending on the level of detail in your workplan, it may be included in the main body of the proposal or as annex. An example workplan (in GANTT chart format) is contained in Annex 4 and can be used if no format is specified by the donor. The workplan sometimes also includes details of the person within the CSO who will be responsible for overseeing each activity.

Monitoring evaluation and learning (MEL)

This is a critical section and must not be underestimated. Donors need to see that they are 'buying' good development results and that those delivering projects for them can robustly measure results (beyond counting) and derive learning from what they are doing. It is advised to add 5% of the total development costs onto your budget for MEL costs (this may be negotiable with the donor).

The section should set out your overall approach to MEL, from original baseline research to final evaluation and impact assessment. Note that most donors have standardised approaches to monitoring and evaluation and financial and narrative reporting processes and you will have to abide by these. Nonetheless, how you will conduct day to day monitoring and how you will use data to inform project management will be your decision.

In the section you should set out your anticipated methods, tools, inputs and scheduling of MEL activity – a MEL plan. This may be revised once you start delivery, but it will show that you have thought it through.

You may benefit from presenting a summary of your logical framework in this section – and the full logical framework should be appended – though always check and conform to the donor's requirements. The **ACT Logframe Toolkit** provides further guidance on developing a logical framework.

Some tips:

- Don't underestimate MEL or leave it to the last minute. It should be a key consideration of your overall project strategy and should have been well thought through in advance of writing your proposal
- Resource MEL adequately – ensure that there is adequate budget provision set aside to do it properly
- Think how you can make your MEL participatory and accountable – think about who you are working with (beneficiaries) and how you can use MEL to be accountable to them (so-called 'downwards accountability') as well as to the donor (so-called 'upwards accountability')
- Remember the L part of MEL – learning. Data is good, but how will you use it? Consider how you will disseminate critical results, information and findings that your project has generated
- Don't leave MEL to 'the MEL person'. Rather like G&SI, MEL is everybody's responsibility; the MEL Manager is simply the person who has overall responsibility for it.

Supplementary sections of a proposal

The previous section of the Toolkit has focused on the main body of the proposal. However, there are other important sections of the proposal that require you to present clear and well thought through information. Some of these are briefly covered below.

Organisational capability and experience

This is where you will demonstrate to the potential donor how well suited your CSO is to deliver the project – the organisational 'track record'. Again, there are numerous ways in which donors may ask to receive this – some for example will request that you complete a specific format for each project reference that you provide. What is important to remember is that:

- This section should be tailored for the specific proposal – it should not be copied over from a 'similar' proposal the CSO has already made
- Focus on your experience that is most closely matched to the project you are now pitching for - put your 'most important' references up front: references that show you really know the location/problem/subject/donor, for example
- Project references should be very specific and accurate – what did you do, when, where, for which donor(s), for how long and with what actual results? Do not exaggerate your achievements – these can easily be checked
- References quickly date – ideally include references from the last 3 years only (but follow guidance from the donor)
- Be concise – important as organisational experience is, it can be very dry reading for reviewers

Staffing

This is your opportunity to profile key staff that will deliver the project you have described in your proposal. It helps give the donor confidence that you can deliver what you have already set out. As with the organisational experience, there are numerous ways in which this information may be required – again, always follow the donor's guidelines. Some general guidelines to remember include:

- In the main body of the proposal, you should only provide a brief profile of key team members who will be responsible for delivery. You may need to provide full CVs, but these will be in the annex
- Make sure that you profile key staff members who are being specifically charged out to the donor in your financial proposals – this is good for transparency. Do not profile staff if they will have no role
- Ensure that you profile key staff across the team – finance, project management, MEL, G&SI, for example, not just the project leader or main technical staff
- Focus on the experience and achievements of staff that are most relevant to the project you are applying for. Lengthy descriptions of academic history and publications are not appropriate.
- Be concise, be accurate and accountable. Don't exaggerate anything but ensure you present a convincing picture of a team that will deliver.

Organisational governance

You may be required – or you may choose – to present your organisational governance arrangements. This will help the donor to see that not only does your CSO have a good idea and a good team, but that you have the institutional capacity to support your team. It will also demonstrate that your CSO is committed to accountability, transparency and G&SI mainstreaming.

This brief section may include details on how the organisation is managed – its senior leadership; and accountability mechanisms – the Board of Trustees, role of the community, etc. If appropriate, you may choose to include an organisational structure ('organogram') that shows the lines of accountability throughout the organisation. You may also mention key policies (eg finance, human resources, safeguarding, G&SI) that govern aspects of your organisation – and consider including some of these as annexes – depending on the donor's requirements.

Risk analysis management

Some donors will expect you to provide a risk analysis as part of your proposal. This is an opportunity to demonstrate that your CSO has identified some of the likely risks of working in the location(s) that the project intends to work in and the risks associated with the kind of activity that the CSO intends to implement. The research used to generate the understanding of the need for the project ('context analysis') will be a useful start to identifying potential risks, as will the wider organisational experience of the CSO. Wherever possible, each risk should have an associated mitigation strategy described that would lower the impact (consequences) of the risk. Risks and mitigation should be realistic – it as about anticipating and managing anticipated risk, not listing every conceivable risk. Each CSO (and donor) will have its own risk appetite, but mostly donors will look for a balanced set of risks: too little risk may inhibit innovation; and too much risk may place the project, or people in danger. See the ACT Toolkit on Risk Assessment and Management for further guidance.

THE BUDGET

Budgeting is complicated and usually must be completed to comply with the donor's requirements. Detailed guidance on budget preparation cannot be adequately covered in this Toolkit as donors' requirements vary greatly.

There are, however, some generic points about the budget and budget summary that can be made here:

- Agree fees and arrangements with partners/consultants before finalising the budget. The budget is usually fixed after submission. So it is important to include all overheads realistically.
- Be specific. State up-front what you would like the donor to fund, whether it is the whole project or just a part of it, or whether you are seeking core funding (if available)
- Be realistic. If you have done your homework properly you will have some idea of the usual size of grants from this donor for this kind of work and the sort of size of grants available for an organisation with the turnover of your CSO (check – the donor may even provide guidance on this)
- Be accurate. Budgets submitted with errors both create an impression of a sloppy organisation and potentially pose a risk to the organisation as the budget is contractually binding
- Do not itemise line details in the body of the proposal. Rather, focus on a simple table that presents totals per year, and by broad categories e.g., capacity development, staffing, travel and expenses, monitoring and evaluation, etc. However, if the donor does not want to see any financial data in the body of the main proposal do not include it
- Provide a picture of your financing strategy for the organisation, eg with whom else you work, whether any money or support has already been offered for the current project, and if so, how much and in what form. If the intention is to raise any of the money from the intended beneficiaries, explain the reasoning behind this, and the mechanisms that will be put in place to facilitate it
- Demonstrate the value for money (VFM) of your project and your organisation. Highlight efficiency and cost-effectiveness, not just the 'economy' (cost) dimensions of value for money. Always consider equity – how will the use of money or other resources be used equitably, ensuring that outcomes are distributed equally among underserved population groups?
- Do not over-extend your funding request – the donor will require evidence of experience of grant management, levels of project funding managed, and will request details of secure financial management systems in place
- Prepare to comply with a due diligence assessment by the donor prior to receipt of funding

A sample budget template is provided in Annex 3. This may be useful for CSOs to use or adapt if no specific budget guidance is provided by a donor or if the CSO is making speculative applications.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

It is clear from everything in this Toolkit, that proposal writing is not a simple task. It will have involved many members of the team over a process of at least several weeks. Even if one person has overall responsibility for the proposal, it is likely that they will have been heavily occupied during the preparation of the proposal.

Given the great ideas and the hard work that have gone in to getting this far, ensure that you have built in time – and resources – for a thorough quality assurance (QA) review of all aspects of the proposal. This may be an internal team or colleague or even a trusted external person. Whoever they are, they should have full access to the proposal contents, including the finances. Key checks they should make include:

- Is the proposal prepared in line with the donor's guidance / requirements? Is everything included that needs to be?
- Does the proposal read well and clearly – Will the reader/reviewer quickly get the gist of your ideas? Does it overuse jargon?
- Are the key aspects (the body) of the proposal well and logically laid out and are the links between them clearly made (the problem, the objectives, the strategy, the activities)?

- Does the proposal pay adequate attention to gender and social inclusion throughout?
- Does the proposal strongly demonstrate why it should be your CSO that does this job – that your experience, insight, knowledge, and staffing are superior to others?
- Do the finances match the narrative – is there any discrepancy between them?
- Do the finances correctly add up and contain all information requested by the donor (which may be extensive)?
- Does the proposal demonstrate value for money?

This is not exhaustive but is an indicative list of what a quality reviewer should be looking for. Each CSO should draw up its own approach to QA and should be consistent in how QA is used before proposals are submitted. Always ensure that enough time is given to the QA so that you have time to respond to the issues that the process may highlight.

PACKAGING AND SUBMITTING THE PROPOSAL

This may seem the simplest part of the proposal writing and submission process, but it must be done absolutely correctly, following all guidelines provided by the donor. Take good note of how the proposal is to be submitted, in what file format(s), by when, and with which covering documentation. Check who in your CSO is eligible to sign any letter of submission and check whether a signature receipt / e-receipt is required. Always look out for what time the proposal is to be submitted – it will not necessarily be Nigerian time if the proposal is being submitted to an international donor.

GOOD PROPOSAL-WRITING PRACTICE

This Toolkit so far has focused on what to put into the proposal. But sometimes the how is as important as the what. In this section we look at some of the 'do's and don'ts' of how to write a proposal and offer some tips for success.

Tips on good proposal-writing practice

Preparing proposals is complex, time-consuming and highly demanding. Every proposal will (or should) be different and almost every donor will have their individual requirements, eligibility criteria, formats, etc. However, regardless of the funder, the CSO making the application, the location, context or any other factor, there are some top tips to writing a proposal that should always be considered. The following 10 tips, adapted from MzN International's donor funding team[8], are relevant to any organisation, of any size and experience making a funding application.

1. Plan enough time

Even the most effective organisations can fall short when it comes to planning. If they rely too much on their track record and fail to invest the necessary time and effort into preparing for a proposal, regardless of 'who' they are, funding is unlikely to result. Proper planning is essential to letting donors know that your organisation is professional and competent.

Many proposals fail because insufficient time is planned for collecting information. For most proposals a large quantity of information needs to be gathered; comprehensive plans need to be drawn up; and accurate, realistic budgets need to be prepared. It is not possible to collate all this information in a week. And you'll still need time to put it all together in a format that is reader friendly and professionally presented.

Plan well in advance of a proposal deadline. Even in the event where there is no deadline – some applications can be made on a 'rolling' basis or you may make an unsolicited pitch – planning well and sticking to internal deadlines and quality standards remains critical. Sloppy proposals do not attract funding. **The ACT Toolkit on Project Cycle Management** will help you to plan all the necessary steps for designing a project before you start to write a proposal.

2. Be complete and concise

It is vital that your proposal contains all the information required by the donor and also includes only the information the donor is asking for. If responding to a call for proposals, follow the instructions and (if provided) the format and order of the call to the letter. Adhere to the guidelines, instructions and section headings and sub-headings provided.

The layout and language of your proposal is also very important. A well-written proposal is one that gets to the

[8] Accessed through https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2021/11/10-tips-for-writing-better-project-proposals

point, is succinct, reader-friendly, avoids unnecessary jargon and is clearly structured. This can be particularly difficult if the proposal has to be completed in a language (eg English) that is not the applicants' first language. Funders are mostly seeking clarity of thought and conviction in your ability to deliver. So, if writing in a non-native language, consider whether you can ask someone you trust to 'sense-check' the proposal. Be very cautious however about hiring consultants to write your proposal – your CSO is ultimately accountable for delivering what you have proposed, not your consultant.

Take care to be clear and concise. After reading the first page of your proposal, the reader should have some understanding of the following:

- Your project's key objectives
- Who the beneficiaries of your project are, and how they will benefit
- How much funding is being asked for
- What the impact of your project will be

Part of the quality assurance process (see tip #6) should test this out.

3. Know the donor

See the section earlier in this Toolkit. Proposals should address the donor's needs and requirements. Take time to research the donor's mission, values and objectives, and then show how your own are aligned. Find out about projects they have funded previously and are currently funding, as well as the areas, sectors and themes they prefer. All donors will be interested, for example, in your CSO's approach to integrating gender and social inclusion into your work and the project for which you are applying for funding **(see ACT Gender and Social Inclusion Toolkit).** Include broader themes that the donor might be involved in, such as environmental sustainability or the SDGs. Align your outcomes with aspects of these themes as appropriate – but do not 'manufacture' alignment.

When writing a proposal, always stick to the guidelines that determine what will be funded and up to what amount. Asking for more funding than is available, or for areas the donor does not support, will likely lead them to reject your proposal.

There is more, however, than just knowing the donor's requirements for a proposal. Getting to know the donor as part of a CSO's fundraising strategy is critical. ACT has produced a **Fundraising Strategy Toolkit** that offers some ideas on how to build relationships with donors.

4. Stick with the donor's format

Where the donor prescribes a specific format, stick to it! If no format is prescribed, stick with the order and priority in which the call for proposals has asked for information. To make proposals comparable, donors often create checklists distilled from the call for proposals. So, presenting your information in that order is likely to increase the proposal's chances of success.

5. Follow all instructions

If responding to a call for proposals, follow the instructions to the letter, even if they seem misleading or even contradictory. Adhere to the guidelines and instructions, and resist the urge to include any other credentials, policies and experience that you think might be useful. If the 'call' did not request this information, then it will either be ignored or, worse, may even disqualify your proposal. A proposal that does not follow the given instructions is rarely given any further consideration. If you do not meet the eligibility criteria, likewise your application will not be considered and, worse, may harm your future chances of success. Following all instructions can be incredibly challenging, especially for smaller or lesser experienced CSOs[9]. Where possible, seek guidance from others who have the necessary experience and do not be lulled into thinking that the guidance will be flexibly applied - it will not.

6. Be precise and specific

Ensure that your writing is specific and focussed. Donors want to know exactly what they will be getting for their money. Vague ideas will not give them confidence that you know what you are talking about, even if you do. Avoid using terminology that lacks specificity. For example: "Farmers will be empowered to have better lives" does not tell the donor anything – which farmers? Where? Women and men, PWDs? Empowered how - politically, technically, knowing their rights? In what way will their lives be better – higher monthly incomes, legalised collective bargaining through unionisation, or by provision of written land deeds that are legally binding? Be specific.

You might think a few formatting or budgeting errors may be excusable, but the donor won't feel the same way. Bear in mind that competition for grants is intense and the donor's choice of implementing partner many. Those small errors you make, might be the reason why your proposal gets eliminated.

It may sound obvious but double-check simple things such as page numbers and calculations. Also ensure that all rationales and assertions are truly applicable; that they add value and are relevant. Getting these aspects right could put your proposal on top of the pile.

As part of your proposal writing procedure, ensure enough time is given for quality assurance (QA), either by an

[9] For example, a recent EU call for proposals reviewed by the author of this Guide extends to over 30 pages of instructions

internal team or an external reviewer. If your proposal does not make sense to them, then almost certainly it will not to a donor either. Consider that your proposal may be one of hundreds that a donor receives. The 'smallest thing' may make the difference between success and failure.

7. Present yourself credibly

Even if your organisation is well known, the donor is unlikely to know all the relevant facts and credentials about it. For this reason, you should summarise credentials as short and concise success statements to support your organisation's experience. As mentioned earlier in this guide, do not over-claim your credentials, your experience, or what you will achieve if you are funded. Donors will almost invariably see through this, and it may damage your reputation.

Donors are always concerned about organisational and project management capacity. To prove that you have both, provide details of staff experience, as well as updates on similar projects that your organisation is currently implementing or has already completed. This will demonstrate that your organisation can run projects on time and to budget. Ensure that the project aligns with the CSO's organisational strategy – the donor may request to see the CSO's strategic plan. You should also expect to have to demonstrate that you have a strong organisational approach to G&SI, based on implementable policies and procedures. If working with minors or other vulnerable groups, increasingly you will be expected to demonstrate a credible and enforceable safeguarding policy.

8. Be realistic, be accountable

A successful proposal must include specific, realistic goals that identify the beneficiaries; and can be measured within a set timeframe, against a robust methodology.

CSOs seeking funding commonly underestimate the time and costs required for the infrastructure needed for programmatic excellence, such as staff development, transparent accounting systems, and technology support etc. Under-costing these expenses can raise questions about your organisational capacity.

Under-budgeting in proposals should never be an option. Make sure your proposal includes all of those costs that are often under-accounted for. If the final budget exceeds what the donor usually funds, identify the shortfall and find other additional sources of funding for the project. Alternatively, adjust the scope or scale of the project proposed. Downscaling as necessary can be more impactful than attempting to achieve more with an underfunded project.

All budget lines will need to be fully accounted for, with evidence of efficiency and effectiveness provided. If there are under-spends against specific budget lines, the donor will have a process in place to seek their approval to transfer expenditure between lines.

Donors will increasingly value a CSO's ability to be flexible and adaptable, to change course if the situation changes, or where ongoing learning through monitoring recommends new strategies or methods. However, donors will not value a CSO's need to adapt programming because they have under-budgeted or otherwise under-resourced an activity. It may even result in the donor deeming your costs as ineligible, meaning a cost to your organisation.

9. Make it sustainable

Sustainability is more than just a buzzword. Your proposals are far more likely to succeed if your sustainability plan doesn't simply read 'look for further funding towards the end of this project'.

Chris Meyer zu Natrup, Managing Director at MzN International, advises: "donors need to see a lasting difference, which in turn requires financial and programmatic sustainability."[10] This can come in many forms, ranging from private sector engagement to income generation or beneficiaries' involvement. CSOs are strongly encouraged to ensure participatory planning and monitoring in order to ensure engagement, buy-in and commitment from key stakeholders from the outset.

10. Avoid the "budget rejection trap"

A lot of bidders spend most of their time writing about the project and then treating the budget as an afterthought that the "finance people" will handle. In most cases, this causes a discrepancy between the financials and the narrative of a proposal, especially when the former has been created under considerable time pressure. This is often the reason why many good project proposals fail; because the proposed budget makes no sense or adds no value. This is referred to by MzN International as the

[10] https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2021/11/10-tips-for-writing-better-project-proposals

"budget rejection trap", and it goes to show a lack of organisational capacity that donors are unlikely to overlook. To avoid the budget rejection trap, start with the budget on day one and develop it concurrently with the narrative. Don't separate programme and finance staff during the proposal-writing period. Rather ensure both work closely together. You may need to provide some basic budgeting training for programme staff to assist in this process.

Do's and don'ts

The following 'do's and don'ts' build on the previous tips for successful proposal-writing. We have already said many times in this Toolkit that following the donor's specifications is always of greatest importance. Therefore, 'do's and don'ts' should be taken as generic guidance only – but they will serve all proposal-writers well.

The above tips very strongly align with analysis by fundsforngos, whose analysis of main the reasons why proposals fail is below. (see a more detailed version in Annex 5).

- Non-adherence to guidelines
- Insufficient facts and data to support your proposal
- Vagueness
- Poor Presentation and errors
- The proposal lacks an evaluation or monitoring plan
- Submission after the deadline
- Not directed towards the mission of the donor agency
- Incomplete Proposal/Documents not complete

Source: adapted from https://www2.fundsforngos.org/featured/free-top-25-tips-on-how-to-write-proposals-effectively-for-funding-success/

Table 3: Some do's and don'ts of proposal writing[11]

Do	Don't
• Plan well so that your proposal isn't rushed • Show that you know who else is working in the field and what they are doing and what has been done before (that worked and that did not) • Involve others in editing the proposal. • Explain all acronyms when first used(even common ones) • Keep it as short as possible – and never longer than specified by the donor • Show that you care about the work – that you are invested in its outcomes (ie that you are not just seeking money) • Pitch the proposal with good balance - be human rather than academic (unless a research proposal); let the human story come through, but don't be overly emotional • Make contact with a "real"person in the funding donor – and then address the proposal to them	• Take a "one proposal fits all"approach - if you have done your homework on the funding agency, use what you know to make the proposal fit the agency. It should always be written to specifically fit the context • 'Pad' your budget to include things that are not relevant to the project. • Hide information that the donor is entitled to view • Send so much documentation that the reviewer gives up before they get going (but always send what is asked for). • Assume that the donor knows all about your CSO so you don't need to bother to present yourself well– the reviewers may be unknown to you • Use unnecessary jargon (but do use jargon correctly!) • Make the project fit the donor criteria at the expense of what you think needs to be done

[11] Adapted from Shapiro, Janet: Writing a Funding Proposal; CIVICUS. Accessed through www.ngoconnect.net).

GLOSSARY

Activities:	The actions (also referred to as inputs) taken by the CSO through it inputs (financial, human, technical, material and time resources) are used to produce the deliverables (outlined in the outputs/objectives) of a project.
Assumptions:	The hypothesis of the conditions, internal and external, that are necessary and in place to ensure that the Outcomes/Outputs/ Activities can be achieved.
Beneficiary:	The direct participants or recipients of funding or programme support; a group or individual directly impacted and benefiting from the outcomes or outputs of the project.
Concept note:	A brief expression of a project idea usually presented to a donor. Concept notes contain critical information about the intended project, including its outcomes, beneficiary groups that will be supported and what level of funding will be required. Almost all donors have their own templates and guidance, which must always be followed.
Donor:	An individual or organisation that provides funding. In this guide, the term “donor” generally refers to institutional donor agencies (eg the EC, USAID, FCDO) which review grant proposals.
Gender and Social Inclusion (G&SI):	A concept that addresses improved equal access for all, including women, girls, youth, poor people, people with disabilities, ethnic minority groups, older people, children, LGBTQI+, etc – those people who are traditionally excluded from development initiatives. It supports more inclusive policies and mindsets and increases voice and influence by all.
Goal/Impact:	The highest level shown as the end result or impact that a project contributes towards. It is also known as ‘The Overall Objective’ by the EC.
Hierarchy of objectives:	The hierarchy of objectives is a tool that helps to analyse and communicate a project’s objectives. The hierarchy organises the objectives at different levels, top down, eg: from broad goal to specific objectives and activities to achieve them: Goal/Outcome/Objectives/Activities. From bottom up, each level leads to the achievement of the level above, providing the assumptions are valid.
Impact:	The overall effects or long-term change that the project will contribute towards. It is identified at the Goal(or Overall Objective) level of the project logframe. This may be articulated at a much higher level than can be achieved by the individual project alone.
Indicator:	A means of measuring actual results against planned or expected results in terms of quantity, quality and timeliness. It is a marker which when used over time shows that the progress that has been made. It is important to ensure a balance between quantitative and qualitative indicators to ensure the validity of the findings
Inputs:	The resources that the project must have in place to carry out the project activities (it can include human resources, financial resources and equipment).
Logical framework (Logframe’):	A concise document that is a planning tool setting out the hierarchy of objectives of a project and how they will be measured. It is often requested by donors as part of the application process.

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E):	A structured approach to measure and assess the success and performance of projects, programmes or entire organisations: **Monitoring** is a continuous data collection and analysis process to assess the performance of a project against its intended progress or results
Evaluation	is a process that critically examines a project or a programme. It involves collecting and analysing information about the project's or programme's activities and outcomes. The purpose of an evaluation is to make judgements about its effectiveness and to inform future decisions
Outcome/Purpose:	What the project intends to accomplish by the end of the project timeframe. It is presented as the change that will be seen at the end of the project and may also be known as the purpose statement. The Outcome will contribute to the achievement of the Goal/Impact in the logframe over a longer timeframe. The EC uses the term Specific Objective and USAID uses Development Objective.
Outputs/Objectives:	These are the tangible, usually short-term, deliverables of the project, as a direct result of the project inputs and activities. The aggregation of the outputs will enable the project to achieve the desired outcome in the logframe. Examples of outputs include training workshops, publications, policy papers, and reports.
Project:	A (usually temporary) set of activities to meet agreed objectives, within a specific timeframe and with agreed resources and quality constraints.
Proposal:	A concise and clear outline of a project that seeks funding for the delivery of its outcomes, outputs and activities. This is usually submitted in response to donor requests for grant applications and must always follow the provided templates and guidance for completion if provided by the donor.
Risks:	Potential effects of uncertain events on the achievement of project objectives. The risk analysis and management process can prepare a CSO in advance to mitigate against potential risks that may arise.
SMART Objectives:	SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timebound. Using SMART when developing outcomes and objectives ensures that they are attainable within a certain timeframe. It eliminates guesswork, sets a clear timeline, and makes it easier to track progress and identify missed milestones.
Strategy:	The overarching project concept under which the project's affiliated activities are designed and implemented.
Sustainability:	The potential for the impact created by the project to be sustained after the end of the project, typically without further donor funding.
Theory of Change:	A methodology that defines the change(s) that the project or CSO seeks to achieve and then maps backwards to identify the necessary preconditions for these to be achieved. It can be represented in a visual diagram, as a narrative, or both together.
Value for Money:	Value for money(VFM) has been defined as a utility derived from every purchase or every sum of money spent. VFM is based not only on the minimum purchase price (economy) but also on the maximum efficiency and effectiveness of the purchase. Development projects additionally examine VFM through the lens of equity, in recognition that delivery of development objectives to marginalised groups is important and, under some circumstances, more expensive to achieve.
Workplan:	A summary of the schedule or timeline of project activities proposed. This is often presented as a GANTT Chart.

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Grassroots Collective

Tools for Project Planning https://www.thegrassrootscollective.org/practical-development-tools-course

INTRAC

Setting objectives: https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Setting-objectives.pdf

How to Develop a Monitoring and Evaluation Plan: https://www.thecompassforsbc.org/how-to-guides/how-develop-monitoring-and-evaluation-plan

Online Pictures

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USAID

Proposal Summary Template. https://2012-2017.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/Proposal%20Summary%20Template.docx

ANNEX 1

Typical content / structure for a funding proposal

Almost all donors have specific content and structure requirements (see Annex 2 for the EC's requirements). The guide in this annex represents a harmonised version of many donors' requirements and is intended only for guidance. It may also be useful as a structure to follow or adapt in the case that a donor does not specify the content and structure they require. But the golden rule is – follow all instructions provided.

Section	Typical Content	Comment
Title page	• Title of proposal. • Name of agency to whom proposal is being submitted. • Name and address of your organisation, registration details, if possible with a logo. • Name of the contact person who is authorised to discuss the proposal. • Date.	The title should capture the essence of the project in a short phrase or sentence. It should not be very long.
Summary page	Summary of the proposal	Capture the essence of the project by stating: • what the location, current context or situation is • the specific problem/rights the project will address • what your organisation feels would be a way of addressing the problems using its expertise, with the rationale behind this • emphasise how G&SI will be mainstreamed • what impact will be achieved • who the main beneficiaries will be • the time period envisaged • the overall cost.
Proposal - body of the proposal	• Context (about a page) • Specific/relevant opportunities and/or problems for organisation and for donor • Objectives including clarification of who are the beneficiaries, if not already stated) • Intended strategy / process • MEL Plan (two to three pages) • Activity Schedule/Workplan/Gantt chart (this may appear in the proposal template or can be attached as an Annex)	• Describe the context briefly, giving relevant figures • Explain the participatory process used to identify the problem or issue the project will address • State what qualifies your organisation to address such issues • Details of key stakeholders the project will engage with • State the hierarchy of objectives of the project and check their (if, then logic – See ACT Logframe Toolkit) • Summarise the intended process. • Develop an MEL plan, providing measurable (SMART) objectives qualitative and quantitative indicators (2-3 against each objective) and sources of verification. Include planning for mid-term and final project evaluation.
		You can refer to the appendices for more detail. If there is a gender, PWD, or other specific element, highlight it, Identify potential risks involved in the project, mention briefly how you will mitigate against these, and what degree of flexibility will be needed from the donor side. Discuss sustainability of the project and/or impact.

Section	Typical Content	Comment
Conclusions and budgeting	State briefly what you are requesting from the agency and why. Include a brief budget summary.	The detailed budget should be in the appendices. Here just give main budget items and totals over the whole project period. This is also a good place to summarise your financing plan for the project eg., who else are you asking for money from?
Appendices	Detailed technical description of project, methods, timetable, detailed budget, audited financial statements, examples of organisational policies etc (almost certainly the donor will specify what is required).	This is where you can put detail without making the body of the proposal too long. If you have prepared a logical framework, this is where it should be presented.
Bibliography / References	List any references you have used, in the order in which you mention them in the text.	Mostly list sources which should be widely considered as credible

Table Adapted from Shapiro, Janet: Writing a Funding Proposal; CIVICUS. Accessed through www.ngoconnect.net).

ANNEX 2

Concept note and proposal content requirements for the EC

Every donor has its own requirements and instructions for CSOs applying for grants. Whilst there is a degree of consistency across donors, each application a CSO makes must comply with the instructions provided by the donor. Because of the variation and number of possible donors, it is impossible to provide details on each.

The European Commission is one donor which regularly provides a large number of grants to CSOs in many countries, whether directly (through the EC's own programmes such as the EU Support to Democratic Governance in Nigeria Programme (EU-SDGN), or indirectly through managed programmes such as Agents for Citizen-Driven Transformation (EU-ACT), which is managed by the British Council in Nigeria. The standard content requirements for an EC concept note and full proposal are therefore presented below.[12] The guidance below may also be useful for those CSOs applying to donors who do not specify the content requirements for concept notes or proposals.

Please note that the following guidance is taken from a request for proposals launched in Nigeria by the EC in November 2021. This call is closed and is not accepting concept notes. It is presented solely as a learning resource to assist CSOs to examine the typical content requirements for EC grant applications. Although standard, please be aware that EC requirements do change – always thoroughly examine the content requirements and all other instructions prior to making an application.

Standard content requirements for an EC concept note

Objectives of the action	*<Overall objective(s) (i.e. Impact) >* *<Specific objective(s) (i.e. Outcome(s)>*
Target group(s)[13]	
Final beneficiaries[14]	
Estimated outputs	
Main activities	

[12] The standard concept note and proposal content requirements for European Commission requests for proposal including can be reviewed at https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/europeaid/online-services/index.cfm?do=publi.welcome&nbPubliList=15&orderby=upd&orderbyad=Desc&searchtype=RS&apply=N&aofr=172967&userlanguage=en
[13] Target groups are groups/entities who will directly benefit from the action at the action purpose level.
[14] Final beneficiaries are those who will benefit from the action in the long term at the level of the society or sector at large.

2. Description of the action (maximum of 2 pages, Ariel script, font size 10)

In this section the applicant(s) must:

- Give the background to the preparation of the action, in particular on the sector/country/regional context (including key challenges). Mention any specific analysis/study carried out to inform the design (context analysis).
- Explain the objectives of the action given in the table in Section 1.1.
- Describe the key stakeholder groups, their attitudes towards the action and any consultations held.
- Briefly outline intervention logic underpinning the Action, indicating the expected outputs, outcome(s) and impact as well as underlying the main risks and assumptions towards their achievement.
- Briefly outline the type of activities proposed, including a description of linkages/relationships between activity clusters.
- Explain how the Action will mainstream relevant cross-cutting issues such as promotion of human rights[15], gender equality[16], democracy, good governance, support to youth, children's rights and indigenous peoples, environmental sustainability[17] and combating HIV/AIDS (if there is a strong prevalence in the target country/region).

3. Relevance of the action (maximum of 3 pages, Ariel script, font size 10). In this section, you must answer the following:

A. Relevance (of the action) to the objectives/sectors/themes/specific priorities of the call for proposals. You will have to provide all the following information:

- Describe the relevance of the action to the objective(s) and priority(ies) of the call for proposals.
- Describe the relevance of the action to any specific subthemes/sectors/areas and any other specific requirements stated in the guidelines for applicants, e.g. local ownership etc.
- Describe which of the expected results referred to in the guidelines for applicants will be addressed.

E. Relevance (of the action) to the particular needs and constraints of the target country/countries, region(s) and/or relevant sectors (including synergy with other EU initiatives and avoidance of duplication). You will have to provide all the following information:

- State clearly the specific pre-project situation in the target country/countries, region(s) and/or sectors (include quantified data analysis where possible).
- Provide a detailed analysis of the problems to be addressed by the action and how they are interrelated at all levels.
- Refer to any significant plans undertaken at national, regional and/or local level relevant to the action and describe how the action will relate to such plans.
- Where the action is the continuation of a previous action, clearly indicate how it is intended to build on the activities/results of this previous action; refer to the main conclusions and recommendations of any evaluations carried out.
- Where the action is part of a larger programme, clearly explain how it fits or is coordinated with that programme or any other planned project. Specify the potential synergies with other initiatives, in particular by the European Commission.
- Explain the complementarity with other initiatives supported by the EU and by other donors (Member States & others).

L. Describe and define the target groups and final beneficiaries, their needs and constraints, and state how the action will address these needs. You will have to provide all the following information:

- Give a description of each of the target groups and final beneficiaries (quantified where possible), including selection criteria.
- Identify the needs and constraints (including capacity constraints) of each of the target groups and final beneficiaries.
- Demonstrate the relevance of the proposal to the needs and constraints of the target groups and final beneficiaries.
- Explain any participatory process ensuring participation by the target groups and final beneficiaries.

Q. Particular added-value elements

- Indicate any specific added-value elements of the action, e.g. the promotion or consolidation of public-private partnerships, innovation and best practice.

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[15] Including those of people with disabilities. For more information, see 'Guidance note on disability and development' at https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/disability-inclusive-development-cooperation-guidance-note-eu-staff_en
[16] See Guidance on Gender equality at https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/toolkit-mainstreaming-gender-equality-ec-development-cooperation_en
[17] See Guidelines for environmental integration at https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sectors/economic-growth/environment-and-green-economy/climate-change-and-environment_en

Standard content requirements for an EC proposal

A well worked out concept note will provide the foundations for writing your full proposal. Much of the content you have presented in your concept note will be used for your proposal, though with much greater levels of detail and with additional requirements such as a workplan, logical framework and budget (see additional annexes and ACT resources for guidance). In summary, a full proposal to the EC will be structured as follows. You will be able to see that this is very similar to the guidance about the general content of proposals provided in this Toolkit.

1 General information (about the applicant(s)

2 The action

2.1. Description of the action

2.1.1. Description (max 13 pages)

2.1.2. Methodology (max 5 pages)

2.1.3. Indicative action plan for implementing the action (max 4 pages)

2.1.4. Sustainability of the action (max 3 pages)

2.1.5. Logical Framework

2.1.6. Budget, amount requested from the contracting authority and other expected sources of funding

2.2. Lead applicant's Experience

3 The lead applicant, the co-applicant(s) and affiliated entities

4 Associates participating in the action

5 Declarations

5.1. Declaration by the lead applicant (full application)

5.2. Mandate (for co-applicant(s))

5.3. Affiliated entity(ies)

Always follow instructions and guidance

It should be clear from the above that preparing a concept note, let alone a proposal, requires a great deal of thought, planning and time, as we have said throughout this Toolkit.Many institutional donors such as the EC have very exacting requirements and will rule out all applications that do not follow them. ALWAYS follow ALL instructions.

ANNEX 3:
Sample budget template

As with previous guidance, ensure that you precisely follow the donor's instructions on completing the budget. An example of a donor's budget for grant applications (EC) can be viewed at https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/europeaid/online-services/index.cfm?do=publi.welcome&nbPubliList=15&orderby=upd&orderbyad=Desc&searchtype=RS&apply=N&aofr=172967&userlanguage=en (Excel sheet - Annex B).

The table below is the summary page for ACT grants and sets out the format for the costings which must be submitted by the CSO as an MS Excel file. Separate worksheets should normally be prepared for each Activity, however, for simple projects a single table will suffice.

This summary table/worksheet should provide the combined line items from each Activity sheet into a single overall costing for the project.

No.	Line Item	Units	Qty	Rate (N)	Line Amount (N)	Notes
	Activity Area					
1	Technical Assistance (TA)					
1.1	3rd Party Professional Fees	day				
1.2	Salaries	month				
2	TA associated reimbursable costs					
2.1	Transportation (Public Transport and private vehicle mileage)					
2.2	Accommodation					
2.3	Subsistence / Food					
3	Capital Equipment					
3.1	Capital Equipment					
3.2	Maintenance of capital equipment					
4	Premises					
4.1	Rental of premises					
4.2	Utilities for premises					
5	Administration					
5.1	Consumables					
5.2	Communications					
6	Activities					
6.1	Training, workshops and events					
6.2	Research, Surveys and Studies					
7	Dissemination and Replication					
7.1	Publicity, Information dissemination costs					
8	Management Costs					
8.1	Management costs (%)					
	Sub-Total for Activity Area					

ANNEX 4:

Sample workplan template

Key Activities	Responsible Person / Party	Outputs/Results anticipated (Milestones)	Start Date and End Date	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Month 4	Month 5	Month 6	Month 7	Month 8	Month 9	Month 10	Month 11	Month 12
The main Activities and outlined in the proposal	*The name of the individual responsible for the delivery / completion of Activity*	*Eg: By the end of M3 xxx By the end of M6 xxx By the end of M9 xxx By the end of M12 xxx*	*The expected start and end dates of the Activity*												
Output 1 Activity 1.1															
Output 2 Activity 2.1															

ANNEX 5:
Why proposals fail[18]

Even though NGOs may develop many proposals every year, only a selected few receive required funding. This brings us to an important question of why organisations fail in writing good proposals. There are several reasons of why some proposals are unable to convince donors to support their cause, some of the most commonly occurring reasons are presented below:

Non-adherence to guidelines

Most donors have specific guidelines for proposal submission, project theme, format and deadlines. Many NGOs do not read the guidelines adequately and submit their proposals without integrating the necessary instructions.

Insufficient facts and data to support your proposal

Many NGOs write proposals with so much emotion that they completely miss out on using relevant data. You can have an appealing story but unless you have some facts to support your story, a donor would not pay much attention to it.

Vagueness

Another reason that many proposals fail to appeal to the donor, is the fact that many NGOs write proposals without properly describing the problem, the target beneficiaries, objectives and the activities. This makes the proposal vague and does not clearly indicate of why you want support from a certain agency. No donor would invest in a project that lacks proper vision and unrealistic goals.

Poor Presentation and errors

As a proposal forms the basis of your relationship with the donor, it is important that you present the proposal in a professional way. At times proposals are poorly written and presented, meaning that the reviewer misses the point/intent. Another major issue with proposals is minor mistakes and omissions (eg page numbers). A donor will certainly ignore a few mistakes but if your proposal has numerous mistakes, it will not create a good impression and may lead to its failure.

The proposal lacks an MEL plan

Donors almost invariably only fund projects that have a good evaluation plan and monitoring structure. Having an evaluation plan in the proposal makes your organisation more accountable and enhances your chances of getting funded.

Submission after the deadline: A surprising number of organisations submit the proposal after the deadline has passed. This invariably results in disqualification of your proposal.

Not directed towards the mission of the donor agency

If the organisation has not done enough research on the donor agency it is unlikely that the proposal closely matches with the donor's mission and objectives.

Incomplete Proposal/Documents not complete

Many organisations submit proposals that are incomplete and do not answer all the questions/sections of the project template. At times the organisations do not submit the documents (Letter of support, registration documents, letter of authorization etc.) and this leads to disqualification. Remember that part of the QA process should be to check that all necessary aspects of the proposal submission are included correctly.

[18] Adapted from https://www2.fundsforngos.org/featured/free-top-25-tips-on-how-to-write-proposals-effectively-for-funding-success/

Find out more

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The Agents for Citizen-driven Transformation (ACT) programme works with civil society organisations (CSOs) to enable them to be credible and effective drivers of change for sustainable development in Nigeria. The four-year programme (2019-23) is funded by the European Union and implemented by the British Council.