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An Introduction to Project Proposal Writing (Part One)

1 Introduction

These pages of Shared Learning attempt to deal with the essential area of putting together a successful project proposal. It is important to remember that the proposal does not exist in isolation, but is part of a process of planning and of research on, outreach to, and cultivation of potential development donors. This process is firmly based in the belief that any partnership must develop between the not-for-profit or non-government organisation and the donor. When you spend a lot of your effort looking for funding, it can be difficult to remember that giving away money can also be difficult.

The funding contributed by a donor organisation is of no value until it is attached to solid programmes in the development sector. This, then, is a truly ideal and beneficial partnership. Local organisations have the ideas, the experience, the capacity and, most importantly, the will to solve problems, but few financial resources with which to implement them. The potential donor has the financial resources, but seldom has the other resources needed to implement effective and appropriate programmes. If the two are brought together, the result can be a potentially dynamic collaboration.

You need to follow a careful and highly analytical process in the search for funding. It will demand a great deal of your time and all of your persistence to succeed. After you have written and submitted your proposal, it might take as long as a year to get even a portion of the funds you need to carry it out. In many cases, a perfectly written proposal submitted to the right donor may still be rejected.

Raising funds is an investment in the future, and your aims should reflect this. Avoid at all costs the 'one-off' approach: do not solely aim at getting the funding required for your particular project. If your funding is a large, periodic grant from a single donor organisation, your project then becomes vulnerable to changes in policy or availability of funding in that organisation. Your overall aim should be to build and develop a network of potential donors, many of whom can provide lesser funding on a reasonably regular basis and a few of which may provide larger periodic support. By persistently and thoroughly following the various steps of the process, each year you can retain most of your regular supporters and manage a balance with the comings and goings of larger donors. The recommended process is not a formula that you should stick to without question. We live in an environment of constant change, and you must adapt the suggested approach to fit the needs of your particular organisation and the uniqueness of your current position. Remember that fundraising is an art as well as a science. You also need to bring your own creativity to it and remain flexible.



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2 Gathering Background Information

The first thing you will need to do when you write your master proposal is to collect the documentation for it. There are three areas where you will need background documentation in three areas: concept, programme, and expenses. If you cannot find all of this information close to hand, work out who can help you gather each type. If you are part of a small NGO with few staff, an experienced board member might be the logical choice. If you are in a larger organisation, you should be able to discuss your project with financial support staff who can help you. After you find out whom to talk to, identify the questions you will need to ask. This data-collection process makes the actual writing much easier. An added benefit is that by involving other stakeholders in the process, it will also help key people within your organisation seriously consider the project's value to the organisation as a whole.

3 Concept

It is important that you have a clear understanding of how the project fits into the philosophy and mission of your organisation. The need that the proposal is addressing must also be documented. These concepts must be well expressed in the proposal. Funding bodies will want to know that a particular project will reinforce the overall direction of an organisation, and they may need to be convinced that the case for the project is compelling. You should collect background data on your organisation and on the need to be addressed so that your arguments are well supported.

4 The Programme

Here is a checklist of the programme information you require:

- the nature of the project and how it will be conducted
- the timetable for the project
- the anticipated outcomes and how best to evaluate the results
- staffing needs, including deployment of existing staff and new hires

5 Expenses

You will not be able to accurately identify all the expenses associated with the project until the programme details and timing have been worked out. Therefore, the main financial data collection will take place after the narrative part of your master proposal has been written. However, at this stage you do need to sketch out the broad outlines of the budget to be sure that the costs are reasonable compared to the outcomes you expect. If it looks like costs will be too high, you should then scale back your plans or adjust them to remove the least cost-effective expenditures.



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6 Components of a Proposal

Executive Summary: umbrella statement of your case and summary of the entire proposal (Approximately 1 page)

Statement of Need: why this project is necessary? (Usually about 2 pages)

Project Description: the nuts and bolts of how the project will be implemented (At least 3 pages)

Budget: financial description of the project plus explanatory notes (Minimum 1 page)

Organisation Information: history and governing structure of the implementing NGO; its primary activities, end users and target groups, and services (At least 1 page)

A Conclusion: a summary of the proposal's main points (Not more than 2 or 3 paragraphs)

7 The Executive Summary

This first page of the proposal is the most important section of the entire document. This is where you give the donor a snapshot of what is to follow. To be precise, it attempts to summarise all of the key information. Consider your executive summary to be a sales document whose purpose is to convince the donor that this project should be considered for support.

Your executive summary must include:

A Problem Analysis

A clear statement of the problem or need your organisation has recognised and is prepared to address (one or two paragraphs)

Solution - a short description of the project, including what will take place and the target group to benefit from the programme, how and where it will operate, for how long, and who will manage it (one or two paragraphs)

Funding requirements - an explanation of the amount of funding needed for the project and your plans are for future sustainability (one paragraph)

Your organisation and its expertise— a brief statement of the name, history, purpose, and activities of your organisation, emphasising its capacity to carry out this proposal (one paragraph)



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8 The Problem Statement

If the donor reads beyond the executive summary, you have successfully caught his or her interest. Your next task is to build on this initial interest in your project by enabling the donor to understand the problem that the project will remedy.

The problem statement will allow the donor to learn more about the issues. It presents the facts and evidence that support the need for the project and establishes that your organisation / NGO understands the problems and can, as a result, reasonably address them. The information you use to support the case can come from experts in the field, as well as from your organisation's own experience. The problem statement must be brief and still persuasive. Like a professional debater, you have to look at all the arguments. Then you need to present them in a logical sequence that will readily convince the donor of their importance. As you analyse your arguments, consider the following six points.

1 Decide which facts or statistics best support the project. Be sure the data you present are accurate. There are few things more embarrassing than to have the donor tell you that your information is out of date or incorrect. Information that is too generic or broad will not help you develop a winning argument for your project. Information that does not relate to your organisation or the project you are presenting will cause the donor to question the entire proposal. There also should be a balance between the information presented and the scale of the programme.

2 Give the donor hope. The picture you paint should not be so depressing that the solution appears hopeless. The donor will wonder whether an investment in a solution will be worthwhile. Here's an example of a solid statement of need: *'Poor hygiene practices contribute significantly to infant mortality. However, statistics prove that hygiene training to expectant mothers, combined with improved sanitation improve the mothers' overall capability to protect their children from preventable diseases, reducing the likelihood of death. Therefore, a programme to educate expectant mothers combined with development of sanitation facilities in the target area will reduce the risk of infant mortality due to preventable diseases.'* Avoid overstatement and overly emotional appeals - leave this to the international organisations' crisis advertisements in the developed nations' media.

3 Decide if you want to put your project forward as a model. This could expand the base of potential donors, but serving as a model works only for certain types of projects. Don't try to make this argument if it doesn't really fit. Donors may well expect your organisation to follow through with a replication plan if you present your project as a model. If the decision about a model is affirmative, you should document how the problem you are addressing occurs in other communities. Be sure to explain how your solution could be a solution for others as well.



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4 Determine whether it is reasonable to portray the need as acute. You are asking the donor to pay more attention to your proposal because either the problem you address is worse than other problems or the solution you propose makes more sense than others. Here is an example of a balanced but heavy statement: *'Homeless among children has become a national problem and an international embarrassment. Each day, children all over the country leave home to migrate to the major cities, often due to neglect and domestic abuse. Frequently they fall into a worse situation than the one they left: working in unhealthy and illegal environments as child labourers, resorting to begging from tourists, and turning to prostitution and drugs. In Kathmandu the problem is worse. More children are homeless here than any place else. It is an epidemic. Therefore, our child protection and rehabilitation programme is needed more in Kathmandu than in any other part of the nation.'*

5 Decide whether you can demonstrate that your programme addresses the need differently or better than other projects that preceded it. It is often difficult to describe the need for your project without being critical of the competition. But you must be careful not to do so. Being critical of other organisation / NGOs will not be well received by the donor. It may cause the donor to look more carefully at your own project to see why you felt you had to build your case by criticising others. The donor may have invested in these other projects or may begin to consider them, now that you have brought them to their attention. If possible, you should make it clear that you are aware of, and on good terms with, others doing work in your field. Keep in mind that today's donors are very interested in collaboration and networking. Duplicating efforts is a waste of their funding and your organisation's resources. They may even ask why you are not collaborating with those you view as key competitors. So at least you need to describe how your work complements, but does not duplicate, the work of others.

6 Avoid circular reasoning. In circular reasoning, you present the absence of your solution as the actual problem. Then your solution is offered as the way to solve the problem. For example, the circular reasoning for building a shelter for homeless women might go like this: *'The problem is that we have no shelter for homeless women in our community. Building a shelter will solve the problem.'*

A more persuasive case would describe what a shelter has meant to a neighbouring community, allowing it to offer security and a potential path for reintegration into the community for the target group. The statement might refer to a survey that underscores the target group's intended usage of the facility and conclude with the connection between the proposed usage and potential benefits to enhance life among the target population as a whole. The problem statement does not have to be long and involved. Short, concise information captures the donor's attention.