UNDEF’s annual call for project proposals is open from 18 November 2016 to 18 December 2016, after receiving the green light from the UNDEF Advisory Board on 10 November (pictured).

Project proposals may be submitted on-line in English or French, the two working languages of the UN, at www.un.org/democracyfund. Applicants can find guidelines, and lessons learned here.

This is the Eleventh Round to be launched by UNDEF, which provides grants of up to US$300,000 per project. UNDEF has supported almost 700 projects in over 100 countries at a total amount of almost US$170 million. All projects are two years long.

UNDEF invites project proposals covering one or more of seven main areas:

- Women’s rights and empowerment / Gender equality
- Community activism
- Rule of law and human rights
- Youth engagement
- Strengthening civil society capacity for interaction with Government
- Media and freedom of information
- Tools for knowledge

In this Round, UNDEF particularly welcomes projects promoting pluralism, diversity, and inclusion.

In 2015, UNDEF received over 2600 project proposals. Project proposals are subject to a highly rigorous and competitive selection process, quality vetting, due diligence and lessons learned from previous rounds, with fewer than two per cent of proposals chosen for funding. A team of international assessors score each proposal against 10 set criteria and produce a long list. To narrow down the list further, UN Resident Coordinators and Experts of the UNDEF Advisory Board are invited to provide comments, quality vetting, and views on how proposed activities would fit in the overall context of existing UN work in the countries and fields proposed. The same comments are sought from the UNDEF Programme Consultative Group, making use of the specific expertise of each of its entities: the Department of Political Affairs, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Peacebuilding Support Office, and the UN Development Programme, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and UN Women.

Based on this collective input, the UNDEF Secretariat produces a first short-list, expected to be confirmed mid-2017, after which the process moves into the next stage. Each short-listed applicant will be contacted with a request for a draft project document, which is in effect the contract between UNDEF and the grantee. The project document negotiation requires the applicant to provide a more elaborated project design, and involves detailed input from both UNDEF and the applicant, as well as scrutiny and due diligence enquiries by UNDEF. Only upon successful conclusion of the project document negotiation will the project proposal formally be approved for funds disbursement – usually after September every year.

Useful tips for applicants, page 2
The following advice to applicants for UNDEF grants is based on selection of proposals in previous UNDEF Rounds. It provides useful pointers for you to bear in mind as you prepare your proposal.

Presentation
The higher the quality of the presentation, the higher your application will score. You can get an idea of what is required by viewing project proposal guidelines. Complete all relevant information, but do not exceed the character limits in the proposal form. Ensure that the information is accurate. Write in plain English or French, avoiding jargon where possible. Use correct acronyms and website addresses. Write succinct sentences and avoid repetition.

Clarity
Clarity is the key to a successful proposal. The applicant must have a clear idea about what they want to achieve and a clear strategy for how to achieve it. You need to spell out the link between your overall objective and your expected outcomes -- how these will translate your vision into reality. Lack of clarity cannot be disguised by the use of "buzz" words or other formulaic constructions; a successful design requires a logic that can be followed step by step. Brainstorm the ideas thoroughly before writing them down, but equally, agree on what specific steps are needed to make them happen, and in what sequence. Play the “devil’s advocate” and criticise the initial ideas until you have achieved a logical design.

Scoring and criteria
In UNDEF’s initial assessment of proposals, each project proposal is scored against 10 criteria. Since an average two per cent of proposals make it to the short-list, you need to score well on all the criteria to advance to the next stage. Make sure you demonstrate that your proposal satisfies each one:

1. The project promotes the objectives of UNDEF
2. The project draws on the United Nations’ comparative advantage
3. The project will have a significant impact
4. The project will encourage inclusiveness
5. The project will enhance gender equality
6. The project has strong prospects for successful implementation
7. The applicant organization has a strong track record
8. The project is technically sound in conception and presentation
9. The project represents good value for money
10. The project has strong prospects of sustainability beyond the project duration.

Innovation
How can your proposal stand out from the others? The answer is innovation. That means a new idea, a new method or an original proposal. If the outputs of the project are simply more workshops to raise awareness, then your proposal is unlikely to distinguish itself. When you think of innovative approaches, ensure that the proposal is action-oriented, with concrete outputs listed in the proposal.

Democracy
UNDEF was established not simply to fund good causes or good people. Arguing that your cause is just and your people are worthy is not sufficient. UNDEF is a Fund to promote democracy and each proposal must be able to show how the funding of that project will advance the cause of democracy. UNDEF focuses on supporting the voice of civil society, and so the proposal must show how that voice will be strengthened, and how that, in turn, will strengthen democratic processes. The more direct the link, the stronger the proposal.

Budget
Give considerable thought to the budget. Make sure the budget relates to the outputs listed in the narrative part of the proposal. We understand that the budget is an estimate, so use rounded figures (in the thousands or hundreds is sufficient). Do not ask for a high amount of salary in the budget, as UNDEF looks for an element of volunteering in proposals. Do not ask for a high amount in other items as a back door method to obtain more salary. Also be aware that UNDEF rarely funds the purchase of vehicles.

Value for Money
Many proposals have scored badly on the criterion “value for money” by asking for far too much in their budget. The maximum grant UNDEF can make is $300,000. The average grant is around $220,000. A proposal requesting $300,000, but delivering the same outputs as a similar proposal asking for $200,000, will score low on value for money. That will probably be enough to knock that proposal out of the running. The more realistic the budget request, the better the score will be under the value for money criterion.

Timing
Please do not leave submission until the last few days. Given that the proposal window is open for four weeks, a well prepared applicant will submit well ahead of the deadline to ensure there is time left if something goes wrong. The later in the proposal process, the greater the risk that something may go wrong that cannot be remedied. And once the online proposal system is closed for the year, we cannot assist you. We have received dozens of “hard luck” stories about bad internet connections or electricity blackouts to explain why an proposal was late. The answer is to start in time.
NEWS FROM THE FIELD

Towards a new probation service in Armenia

An UNDEF project has played a significant role in reforming how the justice system in Armenia deals with offenders who are not a serious threat to society. The project – “Towards a Probation System in Armenia” - is being implemented by the Yerevan-based Civil Society Institute. The Civil Society Institute has conducted research that shows the negative impact that overuse of prison sentences can have on both society and individuals – such as an increased chance of reoffending, greater influence of criminal peers and exclusion from the community.

In the absence of any alternatives to imprisonment, detention facilities can very quickly become overcrowded, in particular when there is a widespread use of pre-trial detention as there is in Armenia. There have been very few alternatives to prison sentences and rehabilitation programmes for offenders serving both custodial and non-custodial sentences are almost non-existent. Given these challenges, authorities in Armenia agreed in 2015 to take action to improve prison conditions, and to rethink the way they deal with offenders who are not a serious threat to society by establishing a Probation Service and ensuring its functional and structural independence from the Penitentiary Department. This important step is part of a transition from a traditional approach to corrections towards the concept of re-socialization and restorative justice.

In a relatively short period, the UNDEF project has contributed to establishing a fully functioning probation service in the country as well as the use of other more effective non-custodial, early release measures.

In September 2016, a milestone was reached when the Governmental Resolution on the establishment of the Probation Service as a structure under the Ministry of Justice of Armenia entered into force. There are still many challenges ahead. The new service needs properly trained staff and managers. To this end the Civil Society Institute recently organized a workshop in with probation officers and prison staff including the ad interim Head of the newly established Service.

This meeting addressed some of the main challenges facing the new service in particular education and employment opportunities for offenders as well as assistance for them after being released from prison. Further issues to be addressed by the project as the new Probation Service develops included how to build on isolated pilot projects, implemented by various agencies and organizations, such as the vocational training course for women offenders in “Abovyan” penitentiary; the lack of referral mechanism among the key stakeholders in the field; shortcomings of the legislative guarantees for offenders to benefit from the employment and educational opportunities offered by the state and the absence of comprehensive policies for different aspects and stages of an offender’s re-socialization and reintegration into society;

The September workshop also created a significant platform for national stakeholders – representatives of government agencies, including the Ministry of Justice, Probation Service and prisons as well as employment agencies, the Ministry of Education and Science, international actors (OSCE) and civil society organizations – where they could learn from each other and exchange views on how to support the new probation service to provide better rehabilitation and reintegration opportunities for offenders.

The Civil Society Institute has prepared a publication on the main outcomes of the event, which is available in Armenian at: http://hra.am/hy/view/2016/09/16/probation and which will shortly be translated into English.

Strengthening environmental protections through participatory democracy in Ukraine

An UNDEF project, in Ukraine worked with local people to engage in democratic processes to protect their environment. The project, “Strengthening Participatory Democracy for Effective Environmental Protection in Ukraine”, was implemented by the organization Environment-People-Law. Despite facing intense political instability, such as the outbreak of a revolution in 2013 and military conflict in 2014, the project was successfully completed in January 2016. The project established key networks and partnerships among environmental organizations in Ukraine. It also involved publishing four legislative proposals to advocate for reforms to Ukraine’s environmental policies to promote procedural transparency and public participation.

All of which has led to significant success: less than a year since the project’s completion: on 4 October 2016, the Parliament of Ukraine adopted two laws “On Environmental Impact Assessment” and “On Strategic Environmental Assessment”. These newly instated laws will replace Ukraine’s environmental law which previously followed an outdated model of state environmental expertise and replicate a tested, European-standard of environmental impact assessment into national legislation.

There is still much work ahead, but these legal provisions represent a right step forward in protecting the environment and the people’s participatory rights in Ukraine. It also contributes to advancing global efforts to protect the environment, one of the U.N.’s Sustainable Development Goal: “take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.”

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Despite protracted conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo for the past decades, there has been some progress towards peace and the consolidation of democracy - in spite of everything elections took place in 2006 and 2011. However, one of the challenges holding elections in a country as vast and with as many challenges as the DRC is ensuring all citizens are able to vote. An UNDEF project implemented by Centre d’Actions Sociales pour le Développment Intégré mobilised illiterate rural women and youth to exercise their civic rights and participate in the democratic process. In the Walungu territory of South Kivu where the project takes place, it is estimated that about 60% of rural youth and 80% of rural women are illiterate. This situation leads to an uninformed lack of interest for civic affairs by many people.

The UNDEF project has worked on strategies to engage citizens through the use of local languages and dialects, and produced tailored resources to facilitate access to information of illiterate groups. A pool of 90 master trainers and facilitators has been created in local communities that will in turn support the active engagement of about 4000 women and 2000 youth to put into practice what they have learned. An example of this is a recent mobilisation session that took place in the town of Bideka, very close to where Rwanda, Burundi and DRC meet. The agenda was ambitious – to sensitise an illiterate group on key articles of the Congolese Constitution and the electoral law. Role play, theatre techniques, image boxes, and video materials were used in an interactive way to educate participants on complex concepts such as the accountability that elected leaders have towards their constituents, the role of observers and the media in electoral processes and the civic duty to cast a vote. Other issues addressed related to fundamental rights, the presumption of innocence, and sexual violence protection.

These women and youth involved will now take ownership of their new found role as citizens by facilitating their organization into pressure groups and interest clubs and proposing and implementing their own advocacy micro-projects. Local authorities and community leaders are being engaged at all stages of the project, with the double benefit of providing women and youth with a direct communication channel with decision makers, while at the same time building the capacity of officials in more inclusive and responsive governance.
Giving the opportunity to women to become political leaders is vital, not only to ensure a fully inclusive democracy, but so that women's interests and concerns are represented in decision making. With the ongoing conflict in Somalia, the problem of female representation in government is not given a high priority. Amidst political turmoil and religious extremism the rights of women are frequently overlooked and women are severely unrepresented in the decision making process in Somalia. And yet, as recognised by UN Security Council resolution 1325, there needs to be full participation of women for sustainable peace.

An UNDEF funded project with Radio Daljir in Somalia has the goal of "Giving Voice to the Voiceless Women and Girls of Somalia". This project pushed for a national quota for women representatives in the recent Upper Chamber elections and for the upcoming Lower Chamber parliamentary elections.

Through radio advocacy and direct lobbying, the project has helped to ensure that the regions of Puntland and Galmudug have 30 per cent of seats allocated to women in the Upper House Chambers of the Federal Parliament. After the elections held on 10th October 2016 in Garoowe, Puntland for the first time in Somalia's history there will be 30 per female representation in these regions.

The success in Puntland came through female candidates being chosen to represent their respective regions in the Upper House in the Somali Federal Government. The representatives are Senator Shukri Adan Camay- Galkayo, Mudug Region, Senator Hodan Mohamud Osman - Las Anood, Sool Region and Senator Saciida Hassan Osman - Badhan, Sanaag Region. In a ground-breaking victory Senator Saciida Hassan Osman went head to head with three male opponents and emerged the winner.

Including women in the decision making process and leadership positions is crucial to achieving the Sustainable Development Goal 5, to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all girls and women by the year 2030.

UNDEF would like to congratulate the newly elected senators and Radio Daljir for their tireless efforts towards gender equality and advancing the human rights of women and girls in Somalia.
UNDEF promoting youth political participation in Morocco

An UNDEF regional project implemented by Moroccan Center for Civic Education to involve young people – especially young women – in political life in Libya, Morocco and Tunisia has led to a number of the participants standing in elections for the Moroccan Parliament, including Hanane Rihab who was elected as a member of the Socialist Union for Popular Forces, coming top of the women's list.

Youth involvement in politics in the region is a challenge following the disappointments of the “Arab Spring”. Youth in all three project countries, especially women and marginalized populations, are looking for opportunities to become more engaged.

The UNDEF project “Engaging Civil Society and Youth in Public Policy Dialogue in North Africa” has undertaken a wide range of activities to promote the participation of civil society and youth in the public policy process including journalism training and summer camps as well as the creation of Youth Councils in each of the countries.

The project has been a big success in getting young people engaged with public policy. As well as project participants standing as candidates in the recent Moroccan vote, a number of them also acted as election observers including Ms. Meryem Zinoun.