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INSIDE UNDEF

Ban Ki-moon calls for defence of civil society, highlights UNDEF role

‘In accepting the Tipperary International Peace Award, I want to sound a call to protect the space needed by civil society. Confident nations are those that see civil society as an indispensable partner in working for the betterment of society. In places where support from individual Governments may be difficult, the United Nations – including the United Nations Democracy Fund – stands ready as an objective source of funding without the baggage of politics and history.’ Full text here.

UNDEF Board green-lights over 50 new projects for youth and defence of civil society

UNDEF’s Advisory Board met on 30 April 2015 and endorsed a short list of 53 new two-year projects totalling 10 million dollars, with a focus on empowering young people and defending the space of civil society. The list is now subject to approval by the UN Secretary-General, and the successful negotiation of a project document between UNDEF and each short-listed applicant. Due to the high volume of proposals, UNDEF is able to contact only those applicants whose proposals are short-listed. This notification is expected to be before the end of July.

UNDEF's Ninth Round of Funding comes amid an alarming trend towards closing space for civil society in a range of countries. An alarming number of Governments have enacted laws limiting the ability of non-governmental organizations to operate, receive funding from outside, or both. Against this background, UNDEF received 2,331 project proposals for its Ninth Round of Funding, originating from organizations in 143 countries, the vast majority local NGOs in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean.

The short list is the product of a thorough and rigorous process of assessment, quality vetting, due diligence and lessons learned from previous Rounds. A team of seven international assessors -- combining more than 80 years of programme and project experience -- scored each proposal against 10 set criteria and produced a long list of some 300 project proposals. To narrow down the list further, UN Resident Coordinators and Experts of the UNDEF Advisory Board were 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 were 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, the UN Development Programme, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and UN Women.

Breaking down the short list by key activity, 47 per cent of project proposals are in youth engagement; 19 per cent are in rule of law and human rights; 11 per cent in community activism; 9 per cent in media; 8 per cent in women's empowerment; and 6 per cent in strengthening interaction with governments. The Round Nine emphasis on youth engagement projects reflects the fact that today, one person out of five is between the ages of 15 and 24. Never before has the transition from youth to adulthood been so weighed by challenges, yet so blessed by opportunities. Young people have powers to network that would have been unimaginable when the United Nations was founded nearly 70 years ago. They are connecting about issues that matter – from injustice, discrimination and climate change to human rights and the need for human solidarity. The emphasis also reflects that this year is a turning point for the United Nations, as the international community strives to agree on new sustainable development goals and a new universal and meaningful climate agreement – commitments that those who are young today will have to live with and carry forward.

Once the short list is approved by the UN Secretary-General, the proposal moves into the final stage in the selection process: the negotiation of a project document, which is in effect the contract between UNDEF and the grantee. This 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, and its approval by the United Nations Controller, will the project proposal formally be approved for funds disbursement.
For Nepal’s Chepang people, an indigenous group living in the Himalaya foothills, poverty and marginalization remain a daily reality. Chepang women are further marginalized by low literacy rates, lack of access to health services, and scarce economic and political influence in a traditionally male-dominated environment. This is why UNDEF funds a project implemented by Development Exchange Centre Nepal, a local NGO, to empower Chepang women to become change agents in local governance processes, promoting pro-poor and gender responsive decision-making. By equipping them with leadership, networking and advocacy skills, they are being encouraged to play a part in local governance. The project is establishing a network of Chepang women resource persons trained in social accountability tools and leadership. They are also setting up discussion fora in their respective villages and organize awareness-raising events for local government, NGOs and media on the development challenges facing the Chepang communities. Community radio is being used to express the concerns raised during the fora meetings, expand outreach, and strengthen government accountability.

An UNDEF-funded project works in 10 districts of the Punjab province to engage youth in democratic and political processes, as well as raise general public awareness on local governance issues and how to use existing legal tools for rights protection, accountability and governance monitoring. Implemented by Punjab Lok Sujag, the project raises awareness and create networks by sharing development and governance issues via district web sites and social media, and workshops for facilitating participation in local governance.
NEWS FROM THE FIELD

Giving young people a voice in Madagascar

In Madagascar, youth exclusion is common and presents a major blocking factor to the development and social cohesion of the country. This is why Vatsy Iombona ho an'ny Fampandrosana (VIF) launched a project with UNDEF to strengthen youth's participation in democratic practices in four rural communes of Ankazobe District, in the Central Highlands of Madagascar by establishing a framework for consultation and dialogue conducive to democracy learning and the involvement of young people in local democracy at the communal level.

One of the main activities is the creation of the “Communal Youth Council” (CCJ), in accordance with the National Youth Policy of Madagascar. The CCJ relies on youth organizations and existing civil society organizations. It works through institutional support and collaboration with local partners.

Technology empowers Liberia’s rural women

An UNDEF-funded project in Liberia works to empower rural women by providing speedy information and networking opportunities via radio and mobile technology. Implemented by the Liberia Women Media Action Committee, the radio-to-mobile service makes broadcasts of Liberia Women Democracy Radio, LWDR 91.1 FM, available via cellphone and online, reaching women in forests and mountainous rural areas. This helps them engage on issues related to their human rights, economic and political advancement and governance processes.

The project recently released a baseline survey report on women's access to information. The report was launched by Liberia's Deputy Minister for Policy, Planning & Technical Services, Mardia Martin Wiles (pictured), and made available to the general public, media, women's groups and other stakeholders. The project also officially launched its radio-to-mobile platform and first dialogue on coverage of women's issues in the media.

Access to justice in the West Bank

The right to free counsel for poor persons accused of a crime is enshrined in law in the West Bank. Yet the government legal aid system is not meeting the need and few lawyers are trained to provide effective criminal defence services. In addition, police, prosecutors, and courts often engage in practices that are unsupported by law and further undermine the rights of the accused. If Palestinian institutions do not provide access to justice, the likelihood of internal conflict will increase.

This is why UNDEF funds a project to help develop an effective and sustainable criminal legal aid system in the West Bank. The project, implemented by the International Legal Foundation, held its criminal defence clinics early 2015 in partnership with Hebron University, Arab American University, and Modern University College. The clinics offer Palestinian law students a unique opportunity to extern with International Legal Foundation-West Bank, the West Bank’s only public defender office, where they are taught criminal defense practice skills and assist the representation of clients in actual cases. The goal is to provide law students with the skills necessary to become effective legal advocates, while raising awareness of the significant obstacles to access to justice faced by poor and vulnerable populations and the important role of defence lawyers in the justice system.

The clinical programme was initially launched in 2014 as a pilot at Hebron University before being expanded to Ramallah and Jenin. For 2015, an overwhelming number of students applied as a result of the positive feedback shared by past participants. The student-externs work under the mentorship of experienced local lawyers of the International Legal Foundation-West Bank, in conjunction with university professors under the guidance of experienced volunteer clinical professors from the United States. During the first two months of the externship, these students have assisted the representation of 36 indigent accused.
UNDEF in the NEWS

UN General Assembly highlights UNDEF role

The UN General Assembly adopted a resolution for democracy through education, which expressed appreciation for the UN Democracy Fund. The representative of the United States recognized the vital work of UNDEF in supporting democracy and human rights around the world and urged Member States to support the Fund.

Young women take the lead in Uganda

An UNDEF project in Uganda, implemented by Century Entrepreneurship Development Agency, launched a leadership and participation drive for young women who attended training in leadership skills, civic education and voter registration. It was covered in New Vision.

Empowering women for elections in Mexico

An UNDEF Mexico project completed its mission to empower women for elections in the state of Veracruz. Otherwise, “women and young people are cannon fodder for political parties during election campaigns,” said a project organizer. It was covered in El Demócrata.