UNDEF opens its annual window for project proposals for its Seventh Round of Funding on 15 November 2012, following the green light given by the UNDEF Advisory Board on 1 November (pictured). Project proposals may be submitted on-line between 15 November and 31 December at www.un.org/democracyfund. Only on-line proposals in either English or French will be accepted.

Applicants can find guidelines, lessons learned, and examples of previous application forms here. Those who plan to submit a proposal are strongly encouraged to visit this page as soon as possible to familiarize themselves with what is required.

UNDEF supports projects that strengthen the voice of civil society, promote human rights, and encourage the participation of all groups in democratic processes. It is the only UN entity that has the word “democracy” in its name; the only UN body with the primary purpose of supporting democracy through empowering civil society; and one of the youngest entities in the UN system. UNDEF projects exist in developing countries, in societies in transition and in challenging environments, and are in six main areas: Community development; rule of law and human rights; tools for democratization; youth; empowering women; and media.

UNDEF grants range from US$50,000 to US$400,000. So far, UNDEF has funded more than 400 projects in over 100 countries, bringing total disbursement to almost 140 million dollars. The large majority of funds go to local civil society groups. In this way, UNDEF plays a new and unique role, complementing the UN’s traditional work with Governments to strengthen democratic governance around the world. It targets the demand side of democracy, rather than the supply side.

In 2011, UNDEF received a record high almost 3000 project proposals. Only some 70 were selected for funding. Project proposals are subject to a highly rigorous and competitive selection process, quality vetting, due diligence and lessons learned from previous Rounds. 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, 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 completed only in mid-2013, 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, and its approval by the United Nations Controller, will the project proposal formally be approved for funds disbursement. This is expected to happen after September 2013.
Dear civil society organization applicants,

The following is feedback compiled on the basis of applications from UNDEF’s first four rounds. It provides useful pointers for you to bear in mind as you prepare for your application.

Presentation
The higher the quality the presentation, the higher your application will score. You can get an idea of what is required by viewing an application form, and by reading project proposal guidelines. Fill in all the information that is relevant, but do not exceed the character limits in the application 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 application. 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 vision and your activities and outputs – 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 applications, each project proposal is scored against 10 criteria. Since only three proposals out of 100 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:

- Does the applicant organization have a strong track record?
- Is the proposal technically sound in conception and presentation?

How would the proposed project:
- Promote the objectives of UNDEF?
- Make use of the UN's and UNDEF’s comparative advantage?
- Have significant impact?
- Represent good value for money?
- Have strong prospects for successful implementation?
- Have strong prospects of sustainability beyond the project duration?
- Encourage inclusiveness?
- Enhance gender equality?

Innovation
How can your application 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 application is unlikely to distinguish itself. When you think of innovative approaches, ensure that the proposal is action-oriented, with concrete outputs listed in the application.

Democracy
UNDEF was not established 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 application 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 application 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 application.

Budget
Give considerable thought to the budget. Make sure the budget relates to the outputs listed in the narrative part of the application. 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 applications. 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 applications 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 $500,000; in more than 300 projects implemented to date, only one project has received this amount. The average grant is around $250,000. An application requesting $499,000, but delivering the same outputs as a similar application asking for $350,000, will score low on value for money. That will probably be enough to knock that application out of the running. The more realistic the budget request, the better the score will be under the value for money criterion.

Timing
The activities in the project proposal should not begin until late 2012 or preferably 2013. Please do not leave submission of the proposal until the last few days. Given that the application window is open for six 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 application 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 application was late. The answer is to start in time.
UNDEF Deputy Head speaks on role of business in supporting democratic governance

UNDEF Deputy Executive Head Annika Savill spoke at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Service, Washington DC, about how business can advance democracy and good governance in challenging geopolitical environments. She addressed ways of supporting solid and substantive democracy projects in restrictive societies and in countries in transition, with specific examples of projects and lessons learned, and partnership opportunities with the private sector. Examples included UNDEF-funded initiatives in China to support environmental public interest litigation systems, in Nigeria to develop a procurement monitor, and in the Russian Federation to build cooperation between indigenous peoples and extractive industry. On the funding side, while all UNDEF donors so far had been Governments, the Fund was now ready to accept donations from the private sector. Other speakers included Gayle Smith, Director at the National Security Council, and Congressman Jim Marshall, President of the US Institute of Peace. The 16 October event was organized by Partners for Democratic Change.

UNDEF Head urges democracy education on International Day of Democracy

To mark the International Day of Democracy in September 2012, UNDEF Executive Head Roland Rich joined Governments, the Community of Democracies, the Organization of American States, the UN Institute for Training and Research and UNESCO at an event at UN Headquarters on democracy education. Mr. Rich participated in a panel discussion along with the Permanent Representatives of Mongolia and Poland, the President of the Council for a Community of Democracies, the Director of Education and Culture of the Organization of American States and others. Given the inherent messiness of democratic systems and the tendency for politicians to manipulate the political process for short term gains, democracy education played a crucial role in enabling citizens with the ability to grapple with those complexities. The event coincided with the launch of a new UNDEF-funded project to put democracy education into wider practice.

Ban Ki-moon highlights UNDEF’s work in speech to Council of Europe

In a keynote address to the Council of Europe’s World Forum for Democracy, the UN Secretary-General spoke of the practical actions the UN is taking to support democracy. “Our Democracy Fund, the UN Development Programme, UN Women, the UN Peacebuilding Fund and the UN Secretariat are working with other partners within and beyond the United Nations to foster democracy around the world,” Ban Ki-moon told the event held in Strasbourg on 8 October.

“More fundamentally, our work to promote human rights and empower people serves the broader goal of strengthening the ability of citizens to participate in the decisions affecting their lives. “I am encouraged by what a local leader of a UN Democracy Fund project said, namely that our support is much more than a source of funding – it is ‘a source of pride, of legitimacy, of convening power, of inspiration to others to take our work further’.”
NEWS FROM THE FIELD

MEXICAN STATE ADOPTS LAW ON YOUTH RIGHTS AS A RESULT OF UNDEF-FUNDED PROJECT

After a long and unprecedented process, the Congress of the Mexican state of San Luis Potosí adopted a law to protect the rights and interests of young people. The move was the result of an UNDEF-funded project to build local citizenship, which included elaborating and lobbying for the new legislation. The law recognizes all youth as right-holders and as strategic actors for development.

The process faced several challenges, including prolonged scrutiny from the Congressional Commission for Education. The project, implemented by Educación y Ciudadanía, conducted a diagnosis of youth to elaborate the legislative framework, as well as petitions, information campaigns, and Twitter and Facebook appeals to Congress members.

The overall project has also worked to establish observatories for youth and women’s rights; hold a state forum for building a citizenship agenda; conduct workshops to generate and strengthen citizenship capacity; publish a handbook on participatory citizenship; and hold a state forum for women’s rights open to academics, civil society, the Congressional Commission of Human Rights and Gender Equity of the State Congress.

In Peru, UNDEF funds the Digital Democracy Network, which uses telecommunications technology to provide poor and marginalized populations with tools for democratic participation, access to public policy formulation, and open and transparent governance. Tools include civics tutorials, real-time focus groups and polls, anti-corruption channels, chat rooms and blogs. The project is implemented by the Global Center for Development and Democracy, which was established by former President Alejandro Toledo, and marks an important step in making participatory budgeting a reality at the local level. UNDEF Executive Head Roland Rich met with project leaders Ana Maria Romero-Lozada and Antonieta Manrique in Lima in October 2012.

HARNESSING IT FOR INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE IN PERU
NEWS FROM THE FIELD

BUILDING LOCAL DEMOCRATIC BUDGETING IN THE PHILIPPINES

A workshop on local democratic budgeting was held as part of an UNDEF-funded project in Negros Occidental to institutionalize marginalized communities' participation in the Philippine budget process. Local government officials and civil society representatives gathered for training in implementing participatory, transparent and accountable budget processes. Regional Director Alfonso Bedonia of the Department of Budget and Management spoke about best practices in Local Budget Management, while National Convenor Leonor Magtolis Briones, a former national Treasurer, discussed mobilizing resources for local development and public-private partnership in increasing local revenues. The project is implemented by Social Watch Philippines.

ADVANCING THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION IN THE MALDIVES

A symposium on the right to information was held in the Maldives October 2012 as part of an UNDEF-funded project to raise awareness on human rights and the right to acquire and impart information. Parliament Speaker Abdulla Shahid told the event that Maldivians were alien to the right to information; before the new constitution, the right to information was restricted and there was a culture in which institutions that should be answerable to the people withheld public information. The country was now experiencing rapid changes towards independent institutions and full freedom of expression, he said.

Although the last Parliament had rejected the right to information Act, he added, the present Parliament was reviewing the draft. Parliament's Social Committee had given assurances that the Act would be forwarded to the Parliament floor by the end of 2012. The symposium was part of an UNDEF-funded project implemented by Transparency Maldives to raise public and parliamentary awareness on human rights and right to acquire and impart information.
US urges Governments to advance rule of law by supporting UNDEF

Paula Schriefer, US Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs, told a meeting of The Community of Democracies at UN Headquarters in September: “UNDEF’s work is especially important now, with so many areas of the world in transition and feeling their way out of systems where there was no rule of law. All of us can increase the reach of rule of law by doing as much as we can to support UNDEF’s work.”

Council on Foreign Relations senior fellow Mark Lagon calls for a rule of law trust fund drawing on UNDEF as a model of best practices and effective partnerships. In a Policy Innovation Memorandum, Ambassador Lagon argues that UNDEF shows the importance of a framework insulating budgets from the narrow priorities of member states, and of supporting nimble civil society organizations.

Jamaica’s information minister Sandrea Falconer highlighted an UNDEF-funded project to strengthen women’s leadership in Jamaica when speaking to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on the need to address under-representation of women in senior positions. The UNDEF project works to improve and increase the presence and influence of women serving on boards and commissions as well as community facilitators at the grassroots level.