UNDEF Board green-lights new call for project proposals

UNDEF’s annual call for project proposals is open from 20 November to 20 December 2017, after receiving the green light from the UNDEF Advisory Board on 16 November, pictured below. Project proposals may be submitted on-line only 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 Twelfth Round to be launched by UNDEF, which provides grants of up to US$300,000 per project.

UNDEF has supported over 700 projects in over 100 countries at a total amount of almost US$180 million. All projects are two years long.

UNDEF invites project proposals covering one or more of eight main areas:
- Gender equality
- Community activism
- Rule of law and human rights
- Youth engagement
- Strengthening civil society interaction with Government
- Media and freedom of information
- Tools for knowledge
- Electoral processes

In this Round, UNDEF particularly welcomes proposals in the areas of gender; rule of law; media; or electoral processes focusing on elections scheduled for 2020 at the earliest.

In 2016, UNDEF received over 3000 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, 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-2018, 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.
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. You should have a clear idea about what you 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.

Democratic processes
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 focuses on supporting the voice of civil society to engage with government and policy makers and to make change, so the proposal must show how civil society actors 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 a proposal was late. The answer is to start in time.
So you have a bright idea?

Here are some useful tips collected from UNDEF’s extensive trove of lessons learned that can help with writing a project proposal:

Be realistic about the problem being addressed so as to align causes, objectives and actions

Make sure the problem analysis not only identifies the needs and views of civil society, but most importantly explains the causes of the issues and weaknesses identified.

The whole should always be greater than the sum of the parts

Seek to establish a logical sequencing for your intervention. Plan by applying a developmental approach, implementing a series of activities that is being delivered as an integrated and cohesive programme.

Sustainability can be built into a project from the start

Activities should include support towards achieving a degree of independence. Think about providing technical advice and mentoring designed to put the project on course to self-sufficiency.

Assess external risks and plan accordingly

It is vital to assess external risks and develop risk management plans for all project outputs at design stage. Depending on location, consider: the potential for natural disaster; political change, instability or hurdles; the capacity of partner organizations; and possible access restrictions on intended participants.

New interactive tools to help applicants

Four new videos have been launched to help applicants navigate UNDEF’s online project proposal system:

1. How to register
2. How to login and create a new project proposal
3. How to edit a project proposal
4. How to print and submit a project proposal
Agents of change in Côte d’Ivoire

An UNDEF project in in Côte d’Ivoire, implemented by Dignité et Droits pour les enfants en Côte d’Ivoire has led to young people from a low-income neighbourhood taking the initiative to solve local problems. The project - Support for Civic Participation of Vulnerable Youth in Côte d’Ivoire – recently trained a group of youth on participatory citizenship. Following this training, the young participants decided to conduct a door-to-door campaign to raise awareness about the negative effect of dropping out of school and to educate parents.

This mobilization took place in Cité BATIM a neighbourhood in the industrial zone of Yopougon home to many poor families who derive their entire income from temporary jobs in quarries and industrial areas.

This campaign produced a detailed report which revealed that half of all children in the neighbourhood find it difficult to stay in school or fail to graduate because they lack financial resources. The young people used the report to petition the local authorities to build a public school nearby and presented their results to a representative of the mayor. At the same time, the young people also lobbied private schools to reduce the costs of schooling and put in place scholarships. This project has led to marginalized youth becoming real agents of social change in Côte d’Ivoire.

Making headlines with environmental activism in the Philippines

An UNDEF project in the Philippines supporting community activism for renewable energy was recently featured in the press after the project organized a learning experience for government officials in Quezon province. Overall, the project aims to build and strengthen mass support for the development and utilization of small scale renewable energy sources and, with the recent two-day study tour for the government officials, the project implemented by Tanggol Kalikasan came a bit closer to reaching this objective.

The event - “Knowledge networking, and learning exchange on renewable energy, biodiversity and wildlife management” – involved government participants being educated on renewable energy, biodiversity and wildlife management. The training has created awareness of renewable energy as a preferable alternative to fossil based energy. The study tour included a discussion on renewable energy, a dialogue on the challenges of various laws on biodiversity, and a talk on the situation and status of the electricity-sector in the country. The project is designed to have an impact on both government and local community levels.
Engaging indigenous women in local governance in Nepal

A UNDEF-funded project in Nepal, implemented by DEC Nepal, overcame many challenges - including severe flooding - to increase the participation and representation of indigenous women in political processes.

In recent elections 65 people from 25 Chepang indigenous communities including four women won seats in the Chitwan region thanks in part to their participation in the project.

Chepang men also increased their representation. These members were actively engaged in the programme including the trainings.

Before the project there was very minimal representation of Chepang communities in both government agencies and in budget planning processes.

In order to address this gap, the project put in place a series of activities designed to educate and empower Chepang women and workshops on leadership and government engagement.

Not only has the project increased representation, it has made a significant impact on attitudes to gender equality among the Chepang community.
NEWS FROM THE FIELD

Promoting human rights through media in Bangladesh

A recent evaluation of an UNDEF project in Bangladesh implemented by News Network determined that the project - Rural Media Development for Promoting Democracy and Human Rights in Bangladesh - made a significant impact on promoting human rights in the country.

The project's objective was to strengthen the capacity of journalists and CSOs/NGOs in rural areas to report on human rights issues with the aim of holding duty-bearers to account or their actions. It did this by carrying out professional skills training and human rights sensitization for local journalists and editors. It worked with 540 participants in some of the most marginalized areas of Bangladesh.

According to the evaluation the project led to action by the authorities to remedy human rights violations including:

- Participants visited a waterlogged community facing financial hardship during the training. The articles they wrote afterwards were said to have led a micro-credit organisation to temporarily suspend debt collection until livelihoods recovered.
- Reports on a damaged building in a government hospital which was a threat to patient safety led to the hospital administration abandoning the building and moving people out.
- Articles about children lacking proper school facilities and having to be taught under a tree due to the derelict state of their school building reportedly led to commitments by the education department to build a new school.
- Reports about a deprived community of fisherman struggling to survive due to restrictions were said to have led to a change in policies and permission for them to fish in the local river.

Challenging media stereotypes about migrant workers in Jordan

An UNDEF funded project in Jordan implemented by Tamkeen Fields for Aid working to enhance access to justice for migrant workers and refugees, recently organized a workshop for journalists to draw attention to the issues migrant workers face.

A key part of the workshop was to discuss how the language used by the media can enforce stereotypes and make migrant workers and refugees more vulnerable. One of the participants noted that the media – based on the rule of law – should work to alleviate the hatred or the negative misconceptions between migrant workers and the citizens of the country.

The workshop also touched on workers’ rights and the labour conventions that apply to migrants and how many migrant workers, especially refugees waive their rights for fear of being deported. At the end of the workshop, participants had to put what they had learned into practice and write a story about a human rights issue - the high dropout rate of high school girls in rural areas.

As a next step, the project will launch a competition for the best three migrants’ rights related stories by journalists in Jordan.